

*A* PIRATE'S  
TANTALIZING  
*P*ASSION  
LUCY  
LANGTON

# **A Pirate's Tantalizing Passion**

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

Copyright © 2019 by Lucy Langton

All Rights Reserved.

This book may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

# Table of Contents

## A Pirate's Tantalizing Passion

### Table of Contents

Free Exclusive Gift

## A Pirate's Tantalizing Passion

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Epilogue

Risking it All for the Sinful Earl

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

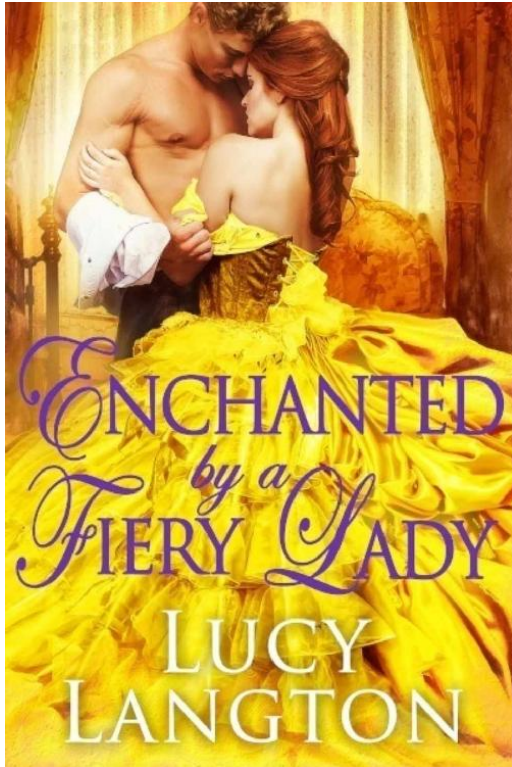
Chapter 3

## Free Exclusive Gift

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get my latest **Full-Length Novel** “**The Enchanted by a Fiery Lady**” (available only to my subscribers) for **FREE!**

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://lucylangton.com/adelaide>



# A Pirate's Tantalizing Passion

## Introduction

Miss Maria, daughter of Lord and Lady Willcox has been regretting her scandalous behavior the past summer, which cost her a possible match. On the bright side though, she now has plenty of time to think about her future. As Maria ventures out for a stroll through the market of Portsmouth, along with her brother and her best friend, the last thing she would expect was an ambush of pirates. In an attempt to flee the chaos, Maria comes face to face with the most handsome man she's ever seen. His eyes tantalize her. Will she be able to resist this forbidden temptation?

When James, a pirate who has travelled from the Barbary Coast to the British Islands, sees Maria he can't help but think that he's never seen a more beautiful creature ever in his life. His tanned skin, long brown hair and his mysterious green eyes make him the most wanted pirate in town. But from the moment he spotted her, he knew she should be his, at any cost. How much will he be willing to risk for her?

As Maria is thrown into a whole new world where survival becomes crucial, she'll quickly realise that there is a whole other side to the man that kidnapped her. The more Maria tries to escape, the more her heart beats in an insane speed for the man with the dark, green eyes. What kind of games will fate play?



## Chapter 1

The grandfather clock in the hallway chimed one o'clock, echoing throughout the townhouse on a warm summer's day. For the servants of Lord Willcox, they knew that it was time to serve afternoon tea to the family in the drawing room. Mrs. Bath would bring in the tea tray with an assortment of goodies that she'd baked that morning. Lord and Lady Willcox would join their children for the refreshment and ideally chat about the day thus far. But for Miss Maria, it meant that this boring day wasn't over yet.

She'd already spent the morning practicing a musical number she wanted to play the next time she visited the orphanage with Mrs. Bath, who liked to cook sweet treats for the children. It was a happy tune that the children could dance to and would hopefully fill them with joy and hope for a brighter future.

Then she'd written a letter to her best friend, Charlotte, who'd married this past spring after a successful Season in London. To the Ton, she'd been the most beautiful and accomplished debutante, and therefore had been the apple of every gentleman's eye. It didn't take Charlotte long to be transformed from a Miss to a Lady. But according to Charlotte's last letter, married life wasn't all that she'd dreamed it would be. Maria had tried to write something that would cheer her up, even inviting Charlotte to come and stay with her family in Portsmouth for the summer to enjoy the fresh air and the lively coming and going of ships. She did hope that Charlotte would accept her offer because she'd been terribly bored ever since the Season had ended.

As Maria sat reading a novel in the drawing room, her legs tucked under her in a most unladylike way, her thoughts turned back to why *she* hadn't been as fortunate as Charlotte. Though Maria possessed stunning looks with her golden hair that hung in ringlets and piercing green eyes that sparkled mysteriously in every ballroom, it was

Maria's choice of words that seemed to always turn a gentleman away from her. She had a tendency to be a bit assertive when she voiced her opinions on different political or social matters, and though a gentleman wanted a beauty for a wife, they did not want one who spoke their mind. And therefore, at the age of eighteen, Maria was still unmarried.

"A penny for your thoughts, dear sister," Gregory spoke up, pulling Maria from her personal reflection. She hadn't even heard him come into the room. As she looked up at him, with his blond hair and blue eyes shining back at her, she couldn't help but smile as she set her novel aside. He was dressed in the latest fashions – trousers of plaid cotton twill, a brown tailcoat of wool broadcloth with velvet collar, a vest of black silk with a cut-velvet woven floral pattern, and to top it off, a silk pongee scarf. He could be considered a dandy with his tight-fitting clothes of the finest quality. In Maria's opinion, she thought he should just wear a muslin shirt around the house on a warm day such as this.

"It is nothing, Gregory. I was simply thinking about what else to do with my time today. I'm contemplating a walk around the gardens because it is a beautiful day, but I don't want to become tanned," Maria said, covering up her own thoughts with a truth. She truly did not want to do anything that might disturb her natural beauty, even though she did love being outdoors and close to the ocean shore. She let her feet fall back to the floor, her slippers meeting the carpet as she smoothed down her white morning gown.

"Well, I might be able to fix that predicament," Gregory said with a wink as their parents, Lord and Lady Willcox, entered the room before Mrs. Bath and the afternoon tea tray.

Maria took her attention from her brother as she stood and curtsied to her parents. "Mama, I have barely seen you all day. Pray tell, what have you been up to?" Maria asked, hoping to pass the time with conversation.

“Nothing of excitement, I assure you. I’ve just been helping your father with a bit of business, that is all,” Lady Willcox replied as she sat on the adorned settee, one of her favorite pieces in the room. When they had moved to Portsmouth from London a few years ago for her father’s investments, Lady Willcox had enjoyed re-decorating the entire house, intent on bringing the latest fashions to the port. Therefore the room had many elegant furnishings, exquisite carved furniture, and an expensive piano, all set upon a Brussels weave carpet and against a backdrop of crème coloured wallpaper and rich curtains to give the space a feeling of great luxury. At night, the space glittered from the light cast from two ornate chandeliers which highlighted the plaster cornices and intricate ceiling roses. And all of it had been paid for with Lord Willcox’s great wealth.

Maria simply sighed as she looked at it all, taking a sip of the lavender tea Mrs. Bath had made that afternoon. Maria particularly enjoyed this type of tea and was thankful for the small comfort. But Maria worried that her mother had sensed her state of mood as Lady Willcox turned her attention to her daughter.

“Come, child, what has you all melancholy this fine day?” Lady Willcox asked before taking a dainty bite of a blueberry scone, as a lady should.

Maria put on a smile for her mother as she set aside her teacup. “I’m not sad, Mother, simply bored. I miss the excitement of the Season and feel like I have no friends left in Portsmouth,” Maria explained. She didn’t want to give her mother the wrong impression or else she might be scolded for not using her time wisely.

“Then perhaps I could purpose an outing, dear sister?” Gregory piped up before Lady Willcox could enlighten Maria with a lesson on running a household.

“And what is it that you suggest?” Maria asked, a true smile coming over her lips.

“I’m expecting a visit from Lord Crawford. He wants to visit the port’s market and see the privateer packet ship that has docked this morning. I’m afraid my dear friend has a heart for excitement and wants to gaze upon the brave souls who go out to fight pirates,” Gregory explained with a gleeful smile, making it obvious to Maria that he was equally as excited to see these fighting men. And not wanting to disappoint her brother, she couldn’t help but indulge him.

“I’m sure a walk around the port’s market would be lovely,” Maria replied as she returned to her tea.

“And Lord Crawford is a good man,” Lord Willcox spoke up, giving Maria a pointed look. It was from her father that she had inherited her piercing green eyes, while her hair was from her mother. And now although those green eyes bore into Maria, she did not dare look away.

“I agree that Lord Crawford is a charming gentleman. He has a large fortune. I hear ten thousand pounds a year. Indeed, he would make a fantastic match for any young lady. Perhaps you’d like to sell me to him to increase your own fortune, just like you sell and buy slaves for your plantations in the West Indies,” Maria said, her voice rising with her temper. She often came to speak harsh words with her father, and her proud nature often encouraged her to speak her mind with the man.

“Hush your mouth, young lady. That is no way to speak to your father,” Lady Willcox said, setting her teacup down with a loud clank.

Maria was afraid her mother might have chipped the fine china, another expensive item bought by the hands of slaves. Maria couldn't forgive her father for entering into such a business investment, and therefore they often argued over the matter.

"You should be grateful," Lady Willcox continued, "because all we have is thanks to your father's investments. I don't remember you complaining about your elegant gowns this past Season, or the many balls that you were able to attend. All thanks to your father, no doubt." Lady Willcox huffed as she looked away from her daughter, clearly upset. Maria dearly hated to upset her mother and felt guilty for her outburst.

"I'm sorry, Mother...Father," Maria said, shifting her green eyes back to her father for a moment. Deep down, she wasn't sorry for what she had said to him. "I'll go and prepare for the outdoors, Gregory, so that we may go on an outing with Lord Crawford."

"I'll meet you in the foyer. I'm sure Lord Crawford will be by any moment now," Gregory said softly. Maria hoped that he would try to pacify their parents the moment she was out of the room. Gregory was thankfully accustomed to Maria's proud personality, even though she had a soft heart and showed kindness to all, regardless of their social status. Maria was also used to him coming to her rescue when she needed him most.

Maria stood and curtsied to her parents, keeping her eyes on the carpet as she left the room. She then pulled the drawing room doors tightly together and quickly walked away, her slippers making no sound on the marble floor as she made her way to the stairs. She didn't care what her parents said about her. Maria was determined to live her life as much as she could by her own choosing. And that meant that sometimes she just had to speak her mind.

## Chapter 2

After returning from her room on the second floor, changing into a muslin walking gown and half-boots made of leather, Maria put on a happy face for Gregory and Lord Crawford as she descended the engraved, wooden stairway carrying her lace parasol.

“A vision of beauty,” Lord Crawford said by way of greeting as he saw Miss Maria coming their way from the stairs. She smiled at him and his eyes sparkled with delight.

“You’re too kind, Lord Crawford,” Maria replied, reaching the landing and allowing the gentleman to take her hand and kiss the air above it. She curtsied in return. “I hear from my brother that you are excited to see the privateer’s packet ship?” Maria said as Mr. Thatcher, the butler, opened the front door for them to depart. Lord Crawford offered his arm to Maria, and although she hesitated because she preferred to walk next to her brother, she didn’t want to offend her brother’s best friend. So Maria took his arm as they descended the front steps of the townhouse.

“Indeed, Miss Maria. I’ve always had an interest in the navy, and I have an uncle who is friends with an admiral. Growing up, I’ve always been surrounded by men in uniform. And now that pirates have become such an issue for Britain, I find privateers very interesting. Once I received word that a packet ship had docked in the port, I wrote to your brother right away and received his message promptly.” Lord Crawford smiled down at Maria, his dark brown hair and eyes giving him a handsome appearance. Maria couldn’t deny that Lord Crawford could truly please any young lady as he was a dandy in society, wearing the highest quality fabrics. “Yet the best part of this whole outing is getting to share it with my best friend and his beautiful sister,” he added.

Maria laughed with Gregory, although a small blush came across her cheeks. Though she'd spent plenty of time with Lord Crawford in the past because he was so close to her brother, she never had an inkling that he'd consider her as anything more than his best friend's sister. But as Maria felt the way Lord Crawford held her arm closely to him, it made her wonder if his words to her meant more than just friendship.

Maria became flustered with her thoughts and the possibilities as they entered the port's market, the smells of faraway lands greeting her. She smiled and made sure to include herself in the conversation between Lord Crawford and Gregory, but she felt very overwhelmed at the possibility of being courted by someone she'd known for so long but never considered more than a good friend. Though she looked around at all the goods, silks, and fabrics with the gentlemen, she was starting to worry about what would happen between Lord Crawford and Gregory if she were to deny a proposal by him. Or even what her father would say to her if she denied such a prestigious offer. Lord Crawford was an Earl, after all.

Maria tried to focus instead on the wares of the market. She loved coming down to the port's market simply to see what new goods had arrived. Many merchants proudly displayed their hard-earned goods on sunny days such as today, and Maria enjoyed tilting back her parasol to see all that was being shown. As Maria neared a spice stall, she let go of Lord Crawford's arm so she could get a better look. She loved inhaling their exotic scents, imagining where in the world they had come from. Maria stood for a few minutes, taking deep breaths, closing her eyes and envisioning far off places that only sailing on a ship would take her.

Commotion pulled Maria from her daydream as she opened her eyes to cries and shouts. She looked around her, puzzled, as she dropped her parasol. She peered through the crowd, who were all staring at something in the distance. Then, they were running.

“Pirates! Pirates!” people were shouting as they ran between the merchant stalls, trying to find a way to escape or a place to hide. Panicked, Maria looked around for Gregory and Lord Crawford, but couldn’t see them. Did they turn and flee back home? Were they down by the packet ship to get a better look?

Taking a chance, Maria gripped her muslin gown and the layers underneath and lifted them a little higher than was ladylike before she darted towards the packet ship, down a dock riddled with crates. If her mother would have seen her, Maria knew that she would have been lectured all evening over the way she ran, with her ankles and lower calves showing to reveal her stockings. But at that moment, Maria wasn’t worried about appearances. She was more concerned about finding her brother and getting to safety.

The further down the dock she ran, the more she realised that she was away from the majority of the chaos. With it being quieter there and deciding that hiding was better than running for the time being, Maria ducked behind a stack of crates, kneeling as she waited for whatever was transpiring in the market to be over. *Were the pirates here to steal goods from the market? Are they going to kidnap anyone?* Panicked thoughts stole through Maria’s mind as she tried to listen to what was going on around her. Shouts. Cries. Screams. Madness was all Maria could hear and she silently prayed for a savior.

Feeling a presence on her leg, Maria looked down to see a rat trying to scurry up her stocking. Surprised and worried about being seen by the pirates, Maria tried to shoo the rat away, shaking her leg to make the rat drop down onto the wooden planks of the dock, but as the rat approached her again, Maria was forced to take several steps back.

“Shoo you mangy rat,” Maria whispered harshly at the rodent, hoping to scare it away. She was surprised then when she bumped into



someone, causing her to quickly turn in the hope that it was her brother.

Maria's eyes grew large as she looked upon the man, who was equally as surprised to see her. No longer was Maria worried about the rat as she looked into the man's dark green eyes, his long brown hair swaying in the breeze around his shoulders. His skin was tanned, darker than any gentlemen she'd ever seen, yet his tall frame and broad shoulders didn't remind her of any slave she had ever seen in pictures. He was dressed in fine leather trousers and boots, and a cotton shirt that was unbuttoned just enough to give Maria an unexpected look at his tanned chest. A rapier hung at his hip, along with a long spiral of cord. Then realisation dawned on her as she placed a hand over her heart in fear.

"You're a pirate?!" she softly said as fear steeled over her, freezing her in place, her legs feeling too heavy to lift and flee.

~\*~

James had never seen such a beautiful creature in all his travels through the Barbary Coast and the British Isles. When she'd stumbled upon him, he'd been completely surprised by both the fact that such a young lady would be close to the pirate packet ship alone, and the fact that her golden hair and piercing green eyes did something to him he'd never had happen before – he hesitated.

Regaining his senses, James took quick action. Grabbing her arms, James quickly tied them up with the rope he always had fastened to his belt. The lady didn't even have time to react as James pulled her near, securing her tied wrists behind her back, and before she could scream, he'd gagged her with a piece of cloth and secured a piece of rope around her head to keep the cloth in place. Having done the same thing many times before, for many years, James was an expert at

kidnapping. Knowing that the rest of the crew would be returning any minute, James bent and pulled the lady up over his shoulder, making quick work of carrying her up the ramp and onto the waiting ship.

## Chapter 3

Maria couldn't believe what was happening. One minute she was in the port's market enjoying the sights and smells, and the next she was being kidnapped by a pirate. She tried to scream despite the gag in her mouth, which was a foul-tasting rag that made her mouth water, with her lips sore from where the cord kept it in place. She hung over the shoulder of her kidnapper, the view of the dock passing her by as his strong arm held her waist securely to his shoulder, his other arm holding her legs to his chest. Never had she been touched by a man in this manner, sending panic rippling through her body as her cheeks blushed a crimson red.

She felt the sway of a ship as her kidnapper took her onboard the packet ship. But she couldn't understand why this pirate was taking her onto a privateer ship. Surely, he would be caught by the officials once they came back on board. In fact, she could guess that right now the privateers were fighting the pirates that had stormed the port's market. She could only hope that was the truth as she was taken through a door that met a set of narrow wooden stairs which led deep below.

Maria was assaulted by the harsh smells of sea, salt, and grime. The air was thick with humidity that made her sweat against her petticoat, stay, and shift. The space was dark, but her captor seemed to know where he was going. Before too long another door was opened, and this time when her kidnapper stepped through the door, he set her roughly on a grouping of sacks that barely broke her fall. A small candle lit the tiny space that was barely a fourth of the size of her bedroom.

Despite the terror running through her, Maria glared at her captor as she fought against the cords that bound her. She pulled at the cords

around her wrists as she screamed at the man until her lungs burned. In response, the man just stared at her, his hands on his leather clad hips, his dark hair falling over his green eyes as he simply looked at her as though studying her behavior.

“I’d save my strength if I was you, *kalos*,” the man said in a deep voice that sent pleasant shivers down her spine. Never had she heard such a rich voice before, and his use of the Greek word for ‘beauty’ made her stop screaming. She was completely afraid of what was going to happen to her, but also slightly intrigued by this man. She stared up at him with wide eyes, pleading silently that he’d change his mind and release her. But when she heard a commotion above, as though many people were returning back to the ship in a hurry as the sound of heavy footfall sounded all around her, along with many other shouts and screams, Maria began to hope that her rescuers had come for her.

Maria glared at the man, trying to show him that she wasn’t afraid and that pretty soon he’d probably be in trouble for trying to kidnap Lord Willcox’s daughter. However, the man just glared back at her with the same expression, as though he knew something that she didn’t.

Then he was gone, closing the door behind him and locking it up quickly. For a few minutes Maria just stared at the door, listening to the sounds of pounding feet, shouts, and yells in the distance while all she had was a dim light from a single candle and shadows all around her. She listened until the sounds appeared to be coming from further away. This was followed by a swaying motion that caused Maria to tumble onto her side, pain flooding her body as her hands were still tied around her back. As she lay there for a few moments, trying to recover her breath, feeling the grime on the wooden planks below her, she felt the sway of the ship as it moved through the water.

Maria cried out in fear as she heard the ship’s cannons firing off the sides, which brought a ringing into her ears that took many minutes to subside. Then she heard shouts of joy from the deck, as though a great

celebration was taking place instead of fighting. Maria felt so confused as she continued to feel the sway of the ship, the sensation causing her to feel sick to her stomach.

Pushing herself back up into a sitting position with the rest of the strength she had in her body, Maria pulled her knees up to her chest as she rested her head on top of them, tears streaming down her face as she feared the worst. That she'd been kidnapped and now her captor's ship was setting sail for the sea. Maria had never been on a ship before and wasn't sure what was going on around her, but all she could do was feel a great despair knowing that what was going to happen next wasn't going to be good for her.

She'd heard of smuggling before, how pirates would come to port in disguise and kidnap people from high society families. They would then be held for ransom and either later dropped off at a port where their family could rescue them once the pirates acquired their payment, or they would be sold as slaves down in the Barbary Coast.

As Maria kept thinking about her current situation and what would happen to her next, with tears streaming down her cheeks and her golden hair framing her face, the one thing she knew for sure is that she would probably never see her family again.

~\*~

James didn't want to leave the beauty he'd kidnapped, mostly because he was curious about her, but he knew the sounds of the ship and could recognize that the rest of his crew, a total of 56 of them, had returned from their raid. The goal had been to steal all the goods from this port's market, but he'd ended up with something extra. He'd have to speak with the Captain in order to find out if she'd be sold as a slave or held for a ransom. By the way her high quality muslin dress felt in his hands, he could only guess that she came from a wealthy

family and would be worth the ransom, even though it could always be troublesome business. The easiest thing to do would be to sell her as a slave and be done with it.

“Aye, James. It’s good to see ye. I’m guessing you kept our lady of sea safe while we were gone?” Leonardo said as he clapped his hand to James’ back in celebration. The older man was one of the few people James remembered from his childhood growing up in Tripoli. Leonardo had been a young man when James was forced to work on a pirate’s ship, and Leonardo had taken him under his wing to show him how a ship ran. Now, Leonardo had graying hair around his temples and several scars adorned his face and hands. Indeed, Leonardo had seen many fights and skirmishes at sea but still lived to tell the tale. And his tall, strong frame allowed him to still work the ship like he was still James’ age.

“Of course, Leonardo. You know you can always count on me. And though I missed what sounds like a good raid, I have a feeling the Captain will like what I smuggled aboard,” James said with a proud smile, his thoughts turning back to the young lady.

“Oh really, young sir? And what would that be?” Leonardo asked with raised eyebrows.

“A beautiful, fair maiden,” James whispered, leaning close to Leonardo before he clasped the man on the back and went in search for the Captain.

“Ye best be sharing her with me!” Leonardo called after him before moving onto his duties.

James just smiled and shook his head as he watched various groups of

men moving crates to the lower decks via the pulley system. As James looked into the belly of the ship, he whistled as he saw the number of crates the pirates had been able to steal. He hoped that by the time they returned to the Barbary Coast, they'd all make a lovely profit.

It appeared that the raid had been successful, but as James turned his eyes towards the side deck, there stood a group of men with somber, bowed heads. James didn't need to approach them to know what they were doing. He wasn't sure which men had lost their lives during the raid, but now they'd receive a proper sea burial for their service to Captain Maidus of the Emerald, their lady of the sea.

James made his way to the other side of the ship and knocked on the door below the highest deck that housed the ship's wheel. He waited a few minutes before he heard the voice of his captain, summoning him in. Taking a deep breath, James opened the door and stepped into Captain Maidus' private quarters.

Several lanterns hung from the rafters, giving the spacious room plenty of light. James first spotted a barrel of oranges, and noticed the room smelling of them and of various spices that he found around the space, reminding him of home. These were good finds that would help them all return home safely.

"What is it, James? I'm a little busy at the moment, as you can see," Captain Maidus said as he looked up from his desk where he sat writing out several documents, no doubt taking inventory of all the crew had stolen.

Captain Maidus was a handsome gentleman with flowing light brown hair that he tied behind his shoulders. He wore fine clothing of leather trousers, silk shirts, and always a vest of black silk that showed his status amongst their community. If he could afford such clothing, it showed others that he was a man of means, of power, and could wield

it over the open seas. James knew him to be an intelligent man who used his mind to always be successful. From his previous experience fighting alongside Captain Maidus, he knew he could trust this captain with his life.

“You should add one young lady to your list, Captain Maidus. I found her down by the docks while I was keeping nix for the ship. Depending on who her family is, she could fetch a handsome ransom,” James explained, enjoying the surprised look on the Captain’s face.

“Is she beautiful?” he asked, putting his quill down as he stood from the desk.

“Very,” James replied with a proud grin as he crossed his arms over his muscular chest. “I think you will be pleased with her, no matter what you choose to do with her.”

“You’re so bright, my boy. Before too long, you’ll be captain of a ship like this, commanding your crew to plunder and steal all across the seven seas,” Captain Maidus said happily as he rubbed his hands together with excitement. “I assume you have her down below in the slave quarters?”

“Yes, Captain. She is bound and gagged, but not worse for wear. She’ll survive the attack,” James said, his voice turning serious to assure his Captain.

“Very good, James, very good. You have done me a large favor and for that I will reward you for such. For now, take these oranges to enjoy,” Captain Maidus replied as he handed James ten oranges, surprising James with his generosity. Normally citrus fruit was rationed amongst the crew till they returned to port, so having ten



would give James leverage for trading amongst the crew.

“Thank you, sir. I’m grateful for this offering,” James said, taking the fruit and dipping his head in response.

“Now now, you know I’m a generous captain. Return to your duties, and we’ll discuss the young lady with the crew at a later time,” Captain Maidus said, returning to his desk to focus on documenting the new inventory. James knew that the Capitan enjoyed collecting the wealth of what the crew had stolen, so he was swift to leave his quarters with his prize in hand.

## Chapter 4

Maria didn't know what time it was because the single candle in the room had burned out a long time ago and there were no portholes in the room she'd been left in. She'd cried until there were no tears left in her, until her eyes were puffy and sore from despairing, and her mouth was sore against the bonds around her head. But eventually someone did come for her.

The sound of the lock being turned brought Maria's attention to the door. She lifted her head from her knees as the door was opened and an older man with gray hair at his temples stepped into the room, carrying a lantern in one hand and a cup in the other. He set the lantern down on the floor next to her and scooped up the burnt-out candle, pocketing it in his large tunic. Maria tried to scoot away from the man as he came closer, the scars on his face and hands scaring her, but he began to shush her like a scared animal.

"Ye don't need to be afraid of me, young one. I'm simply here to untie those bonds," the man said as he crouched beside her and extended his free hands towards her head. "Me name's Leonardo and I'm not going to hurt ye."

Maria starred at him, stiff with fear as he untied the bonds around her head, allowing the gag to fall from her mouth. Maria took in a deep breath as though she'd been holding the air in her lungs for hours. Her mouth was so dry that she couldn't speak, and as Leonardo held the cup up to her lips she eagerly drank the water, the coolness of it refreshing her mouth and throat as though she hadn't had anything to drink for days.

"There you go. Much better," Leonardo said as she finished. He stood

to leave then but stopped when the young lady spoke up.

“Untie me, you heathen,” Maria said to the man, wanting to be free again.

Leonardo couldn’t help but chuckle as he turned back to the young lady sitting on a pile of old sacks as though they were her throne. “Me dear, you have nowhere to go and there is a ship full of men who’d love nothing more than to get to see a beautiful thing such as yer self. Being bound is for ye own good,” Leonardo said, staring down at her.

Maria just raised her chin at the older man, unwilling to appear weak in his presence. “My family will come for me, and then you’ll all be sorry,” Maria said, her fury burning within her. “You’ll all hang for what you’ve done.”

“Rest now, young one. If ye don’t behave, you’ll be in a world of trouble because Captain Maidus isn’t known for his good temper. I’d save my strength if I were you,” Leonardo said, surprising Maria that he had said the same thing that her captor had said. Maria sat quietly then, watching as the older man left, and wondered what that saying could mean. What would she need strength for in the coming hours, or days?

With nothing left to do, Maria watched the lantern burn beside her, wondering how long it had been since she’d been kidnapped. A few hours, a few days? Time seemed to pass whether she knew about it or not, disorienting her. Maria’s mind began to wander as she thought about her parents. Would they be looking for her? Was her mother panicked? Her father concerned? Perhaps he was finally relieved to be free of her. How did it make him feel to know that his daughter had been stolen and possibly sold as one of the many slaves he employed to work his plantations? All Maria could do was think of her family as she sat there, her hands still tied behind her back.

What was Gregory doing right now? He was probably worried sick, already thinking of ways to rescue her. Surely he had gotten a good look at the ship while they had been down at the port's market. He would be able to give a description to anyone that would listen to him. And what of Lord Crawford? Maria sighed heavily at the thought of the man. Before she had been worried about having to deal with a proposal from him, and yet now she would welcome one with open arms in return for being off this ship and back with her family. Indeed, Lord Crawford seemed a lot more appealing now that she was trapped in a dank, humid room with little light, and air so thick that she had a difficult time breathing.

Maria focused on the events of the day; how mundane things seemed to be a joy now that her hands were bound behind her back and she had little hope of escaping. How she wished she could be playing the piano right now for the children at the orphanage. Or taking a walk with her best friend Charlotte, when she came to visit for the summer. And even having the freedom to read a novel would bring her more joy than she could ever imagine. Instead, she was filled with fear of what the future would hold for her.

The tears came again as Maria looked away from the lantern and rested her head back on her knees. She pictured each one of her family members, holding images in her mind of when they'd last talked. She felt guilty for the things she'd said to her father and wished she could take it all back now. She wished she'd never left the house and had taken to the gardens instead of the market. Then she wouldn't be stuck in this situation. Soon, Maria was caught up in a storm of self-pity, of hopeful wishing and of fervent prayers as she continued to fear the worst for her future.

James had been given orders to man the sails for the rest of the evening. The strong winds had taken the Emerald quickly away from the British Isles, and now they could look forward to several weeks' journey to reach the Barbary Coast. James stood ready to adjust the sails at a moment's notice as they continued their escape from Britain. Though there had been no ships in sight for the last few hours, that didn't mean they wouldn't come upon actual privateers in the open waters.

James had discarded his shirt early due to the heat of the day beating unmercifully upon the ship, yet it was part of normal life upon the open waters that he'd gotten used to a long time ago. His skin had tanned to the point that he no longer had to worry about sunburn. And when you're surrounded by men most of the time, you lose a sense of dignity when your fellow crew members have also discarded their shirts as they work hard under the sun.

As James stood waiting at the base of the main sail post, able to climb the sails at any moment to either lower or raise them, his thoughts drifted back to the young lady he'd captured and the reason Captain Maidus was so excited to have this hostage. Perhaps he had a client in want of a young lady, perhaps a virgin who'd be worth a handsome price if such was the truth. James was not familiar with the customs and culture of England, but simply knew wealthy people lived there. James knew that all sorts of fine goods were shipped to England every day from Europe and Africa, even North and South America, so James knew that with these trading routes came a wealth of money pouring into the small country. It was this such trading that had brought him his own fortune as he worked for Captain Maidus over the years.

"Whatcha thinking about, my boy?" Leonardo asked, bring James the dinner rations from below. Their cook was decent, but he surely missed a home-cooked meal.

"I'm thinking about how I'm going to spend my money once we land in Tripoli," James said, speaking a half-truth. He was indeed thinking

about the fortune he'd saved up over the years, knowing that one day he'd purchase a ship of his own and manage his own crew as captain. Though, Leonardo wasn't a great example of a pirate achieving the status of captain.

Leonardo laughed at James' response, so much so that he bent over and held his gut with his free arm, causing James to quickly grab his cup of water and plate of food before Leonardo dumped it all over the deck. "Yer going to spend it like you do every time. On booze and wenches," Leonardo said as his mirth subsided.

James couldn't help but laugh as he couldn't deny Leonardo. Though he'd become keen to save the money he earned, he had a reputation back in Tripoli as being a little wild. The slave women at the local brothel knew of him well and he was never in want of company when so many women came to him willingly. It had been exciting at one point in his life, especially when he'd started sailing the open seas as a pirate instead of a ship hand, earning a part of the profits. But now he simply wanted to save what he earned so that he could enjoy his older years on a ship of his own – if he lasted that long.

"Perhaps I'll spend my money on something other than cheap entertainment," James responded with a shrug. Even though Leonardo was the closest thing he had to a friend, he wasn't about to trust the man with the details of his savings. Though most of the crew members upon the ship were friendly enough, everyone knew that you couldn't trust a pirate with the details of your own money.

"And perhaps one day pigs will fly," Leonardo responded as another fit of laughter ran through him. James rolled his eyes as he drained the cup of water and handed it back to Leonardo, before he quickly scooped up the cold gruel with the hard biscuit, using his fingers to down the food so he could give his full attention to his duties.

“Never ceases to surprise me the way you eat your food,” Leonardo said with a shake of his head before he walked away.

“I’m no gentleman,” James called back with a laugh, knowing that his bad habits would never improve as long as he stayed a pirate. There was no need for table manners when you lived amongst thieves. Only Captain Maidus ever showed refinement when dining at the head table, only inviting his closest friends to join him. If James hadn’t been put on this duty for the evening, then he’d probably be dining with the Captain again tonight. He was proud of his position amongst the crew and was glad he could be trusted by so many.

As the sun began to set, James’ thoughts turned back to the green-eyed beauty below, and he wondered what her golden hair would look like in the setting sun, what it would feel like in his hands, and perhaps what her lips would taste like if he ever got a moment alone with her. James smiled as he waited for his next orders.

## Chapter 5

At a later time, Maria recognized the sound of the lock on her door being turned. She looked up from where she sat against the ship's hull, her knees still bent towards her chest as she used her dress the best she could to shield her from everyone, and everything, around her. As time had gone on, the foul smell of the ship had increased as though the space was being filled with a smog of bad odor, of rot and of stink. The rose water she'd used this morning was a distant memory, and now all that she smelled was her sweat.

A pirate stepped into the room, one she hadn't met before. This pirate was a shorter fellow with curly blonde hair, a scraggly beard, and beady brown eyes. She tried to melt into the walls of the ship as she pushed herself back, wishing she could break through and swim to safety. Though she was sure she would more than likely drown from the weight of her undergarments.

"Yer food, miss," the man said as he knelt in front of her, took a spoon of the gruel, and pushed it towards her mouth. Maria quickly turned her head, certain the food would be tainted. She felt certain they would try to poison her, make her sick and weak so they could do to her what they wanted.

"Come now, ye have nothing to worry about. It doesn't taste that bad," the man tried to persuade her, but Maria kept her head turned away from the foul-smelling food he held in what was probably a dirty bowl. The whole ship seemed dirty and foul to her, and she wouldn't dare eat anything so gruesome.

"Ye don't have to be so difficult," the man continued, his temper



breaking as he tried again to get the young girl to open her mouth, even smearing some on her face and chin. "I doubt you'd want to wear this food." He laughed at his own joke, thinking himself quite funny.

Maria turned her head then, bit the spoon and pulled it from his hand before spitting it back at him. The pirate was surprised at first, then irritation crossed his features, giving Maria a cold look that made her freeze. Then she mustered up her courage as she glared back at the man, this time making the pirate hesitate.

"I will not eat none of your pathetic pirate food. Even dogs wouldn't eat such a thing, and you're far worse than mangy dogs," Maria spat, her anger overcoming any of her pain or fear. She was tired and wanted nothing to do with these pirates. She wasn't about to do what they wanted her to do in case they did mean to weaken her with poison.

"Fine, have it yer way. I'll go get Geoffrey to feed ye and then ya'll be sorry," the pirate said as he quickly got to his feet and stormed out of the door, leaving the bowl on the floor and the door wide open.

Maria stared wide-eyed for a moment, thinking that perhaps this could be her chance to escape. Slowly, she pushed herself to her feet, leaning heavily against the wall and taking a minute for her head to clear since she'd been seated for so long. She then took a wobbly footstep forward; the swaying of the ship was making her feel unbalanced, but she was determined to get off the ship. But by the time she made it to the door, a figure suddenly appeared and blocked her path, forcing her back into the room.

"Geoffrey, I presume," Maria said as she stepped back until she touched the wall again.

The tall, bald man simply grunted as he stepped into the room, his arms so big they looked like tree trunks. His skin was very dark, perhaps African or Persian. A long shamshir hung from his waist, his tunic covering the handle, but the long blade was still visible in the lantern light. He slowly bent down and picked up the bowl of gruel and spoon and neared her.

“Eat,” he said in a dark, stern voice as he pushed a spoonful near her mouth. Again, she turned her head, unwilling to fall for any of their schemes. She would need all the strength she could muster, and she wasn’t about to let these pirates trick her.

When she continued to refuse to eat, the man set down the bowl and with his now free hand, gripped Maria’s jaw and forced her to open her mouth so he could put the spoon in. When he bent down to grab the bowl again, Maria spit out the contents of the food so that it landed on his big, bald head. The sight almost made Maria laugh, but as soon as the towering pirate stood up again she could tell that she’d really upset him. His brows were pushed together as he narrowed his eyes at her, his chest rising and falling as his breathing increased greatly.

“No one makes a fool out of Geoffrey,” the man said as he leaned down towards Maria, his hot breath making her turn away as she fought the urge to vomit. “You will eat, or you die.”

Maria turned her back to the man then, afraid of what he was going to do to her. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to go, and she silently prayed that her life wasn’t about to end here on a pirate ship. No, she wanted to grow old, have a handful of children, and be happy in life with a loving husband. *This* was not how she envisioned her last moments in life.

“Fine, have it your way,” Geoffrey said, throwing the bowl against the wall, the impact making Maria jump as she cowered in fear. She heard the heavy footsteps of the giant leaving the room and she turned to see what was happening as the door was slammed shut and locked.

At least she was left alone, Maria thought as she surveyed the damage. Gruel seemed to have been flung all over the room from the impact of the throw, and now the room smelled even worse than before. She stood in her spot against the wall, taking deep breaths even though the stench made her sick to her stomach. She feared that even the smell alone would weaken her.

~\*~

After a while, when Maria felt certain that she wouldn't be receiving any more visitors, she sat down and rested her head against the ship's wall, the swaying of the ship still making her feel dizzy and sick. Eventually she closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift asleep, even though she feared doing so. It didn't take long for Maria to drift into a deep slumber, visions of her family members passing through her mind as she tried to run to them, to tell them where she was and what had happened to her. She wanted to reach out and hold them in her arms again, to feel safe and secure back in her home. As long as she dreamed, she was trying to chase after someone who could grant her the freedom she now craved.

Maria was brought back to reality with a start when she was woken to the sound of the room door banging open. The lantern had burned out sometime while she slept, and now she couldn't see who was there. Terror ran through her as she heard footsteps approaching her. She felt a presence kneel next to her, hot breath on her face as someone came close.

“Time for breakfast,” Geoffrey said with a sneer as he forced some sort

of food towards her mouth. Maria held her lips tightly together as the food was pushed upon her. Though her stomach growled for nourishment, she wasn't going to let these pirates win.

"Eat or you'll starve," he said, anger laced in his voice. Though she was scared, she wouldn't give in. In the darkness, she turned her head this way and that, avoiding the fingers of food that were forced into her face.

Eventually, Geoffrey seemed to give up and she felt his presence back off a few steps. She was now covered in a greasy food that covered her face and dress, but at least she hadn't swallowed any.

"You cannot survive if you don't eat," Geoffrey said, sighing heavily.

"It's not like I'm going to live very long as it is. No matter what plans you have for me, I don't get out alive in the end," Maria said in a stern voice. If she was going to die upon this ship, at least she'd die with dignity. "And not even starving animals would eat this filth," she added before Geoffrey could make it out of the door.

In the darkness of the room she heard the lock turn again, causing Maria to fall into another fit of despair. Not only had she not escaped yet, or been rescued, but now she was covered in food and immensely needed to relieve herself. Tears came again as she tried to figure out what she was going to do next.

~\*~

"I've had enough of that wench!" Geoffrey cried out as he came out

onto the top deck to see to his other duties. He was frustrated that he couldn't get the young lady to eat, and he feared what Captain Maidus would do to him if he found out that the girl was starving herself. Geoffrey could only assume that she'd give into hunger eventually, but he also knew that he couldn't let the girl die. Surely Captain Maidus had a use for her, and Geoffrey wasn't willing to let goods spoil when he knew his Captain could make a profit. Yet he didn't know what he was going to do if she continued to refuse.

"What is the matter with you, Geoffrey? I normally don't hear this much out of you," James spoke up with a smile on his lips as he wiped down the deck cannons.

"That she-devil won't eat a damn thing. If she dies, it's on my head," Geoffrey said, throwing his hands in the air, food still stuck on them from when he'd tried to force the girl to eat with his fingers.

James saw the food bits hanging from the strong man's fingers and continued to laugh. "You can't tell me you couldn't persuade the girl to eat? A fearsome warrior like you shouldn't have any trouble with the ladies," James said through his laughter. This only caused Geoffrey to grumble even more as he wiped his hands on his leather trousers.

"Please, James, you have to help me. You're the one who captured her, perhaps you can persuade her. If Captain Maidus hears that she isn't eating, it'll be my head," Geoffrey pleaded, his words pulling at James' heart strings. Every crew member knew how reliable James was, and James also suspected they knew he had a soft spot when it came to helping a fellow pirate.

"Sure, Geoffrey, I'll go see what I can do," James said, handing his rag to Geoffrey. Sometimes it irritated James how gullible he could be.

"I knew I could count on you, James!" Geoffrey called as James opened the lower deck door and descended the stairs, heading towards the slave quarters. He pulled a lantern down from the wall and walked down the long hallway, displeased to be below deck during the hotter days of the year. The lower decks always smelled strongly of the stench of men and sweat; a smell he'd never come to get used to. It was the reason he preferred being on the main deck, enjoying the sunshine and the warm, fresh air.

Coming to the door he'd left the young lady in, he unlocked the bolt and opened the door, the stench of rotten food hitting him in the face. As he held the lantern into the room, he found the young lady against the far wall, the morning meal on her face and gown. Her green eyes held surprise as she looked at him, and when her eyes fell to his bare chest, her eyes grew even wider.

~\*~

Never before had Maria seen the bare chest of a man before. She was surprised to see that her kidnapper had returned to her room, expecting that Geoffrey had come again to try to force her to eat. Instead, she was now faced with the exotic man she'd faced on the docks before he'd kidnapped her. Her eyes roamed freely over his body, the sight of his tan chest making her swallow hard because she wasn't sure if she should look away. Her eyes felt stuck to his body as she observed the anatomy of male flesh for the first time.

"Are you just going to stare at me all day like a stick of meat?" James said as he rolled his eyes. For a young lady whose hands were bound, who was covered in food and smelled foul from sweat, she was sure provocative.

Maria squared her shoulders then and stood, narrowing her eyes at his capture. "You presume that there is much to do for a girl like me in a place like this," Maria said, her cheeks burning from the embarrassment. She certainly didn't know what had come over her that seemed to attract her eyes to his body, but she couldn't deny how handsome his swarthy skin looked. Maria remembered how his strong hands and arms had felt against her as he carried her aboard the ship, causing warmth to gather in her core; a sensation she'd never felt before.

"You have plenty to do. That includes eating the food you're given and not causing trouble for the crew," James said, stepping into the room and taking a look around. The place was filthy, and he couldn't stand to be in the place very long. But he knew he was going to do this favor for Geoffrey and get on with his day.

"Like I would eat that filth. It's probably poisoned," Maria spat, turning her chin up as James approached her.

He couldn't deny that behind her current condition she was beautifully fierce, and the first time he'd rested eyes on her came into his mind. She'd been scared, but absolutely breathtaking as well. He'd never seen someone like her before, with such fair skin and golden hair.

The closer the pirate came to Maria, the more her breathing began to come quickly, her heart pounding in her chest. If her hands hadn't been bound behind her back, she'd have been tempted to reach out and feel for herself what tanned skin felt like, and if it was warm like sunshine. She looked up from his muscled chest and into his green eyes to see a smirk crossing his lips. She could only assume he knew she was looking at him in such a manner.

"If Captain Maidus wanted you dead, you would have been thrown

overboard last night to sleep with the fishes,” James explained as he set down the lantern and picked up the one that had been burned dry.

“Then what do you plan to do with me?” Maria asked, her eyes fixing on his again as she gathered all her courage. She wanted to know what the future held for her, no matter what this captain had planned.

James thought of what *he’d* like to do with her, but he quickly pushed those thoughts aside, simply staring at her as he refused to give her any information. He just looked at her as he watched fury build in her eyes.

“When can I get out of this wretched room? I need to relieve myself and find nowhere suitable for that. I need a change of clothes, and I need you to unbind my hands,” Maria said, her voice rising till James shook his head at her, clearly irritated.

“The men on this ship are not used to such a chatty woman. If you keep this up, you won’t survive long on board. The more you keep your mouth shut, the better,” James said as he turned from her and made his way back towards the door, entering the darkness he was used to while walking below deck.

“But I can’t survive like this!” Maria called out, desperate to at least be free of the cords around her wrists.

“Then I suggest you start cooperating,” James called back, turning to look at her one last time. He needed to head back up and return to his duties before someone spotted that he was missing. He knew that Geoffrey wouldn’t be able to cover for him long, and he wasn’t willing to face the punishment for skipping out on his assigned work.



James turned to the door and opened it as Maria called out, "At least tell me your name!" He hesitated for a moment, cursing himself for even hesitating again with this woman, and with that last bit of irritation, he left the room and shut the door behind him without saying another word.

~\*~

Maria felt defeated as the door was shut on her again. She slumped carefully to the ground, taking deep breaths to calm her racing heart. There was something about that man that caused her heart to pound in her chest and warmth to gather in her core. Never had a man had this kind of effect on her before, and she wasn't sure if that was because of the situation she was in, or due to his daring features that she thought were devilishly handsome.

Wanting to be at least free from the cords around her wrists, Maria set her mind to freeing herself. She pulled and tugged on the cords, no matter how painful it was. Determination stole over her as she wiggled against them, even trying to use the lantern to perhaps cut the cords or burn them away, but at the risk of burning herself or catching the room on fire, she gave up on that idea.

When she started to feel a slick liquid start pooling in her hands, she knew she'd gone too far and was now bleeding. Defeated, she slumped against the wall as she took several deep breaths to try to rid her mind of all the pain she had caused herself. As she continued to think of ways she could get the cords loose, an idea came through her mind. If she couldn't get them off herself, then she would have to rely on someone else. And if she was going to convince one of the pirates to aid her, then she was going to have to earn their trust.

Maria started forming a plan in her mind, one that she had used before when preparing for a ball with the intent of winning over a gentleman's heart. Maria already knew that she was a natural beauty, despite her current state of appearance, and would have to use her charms and wit to outsmart these mangy men. Maria could only assume that these pirates didn't have the company of a woman very often, and she would have to use that to her advantage. But no matter what, she wasn't willing to go beyond what was appropriate. She could flirt, she could smile and flutter her eyelashes at them, but she'd never give herself to a man who wasn't her husband. No matter how handsome he looked bare-chested.

## Chapter 6

“Breathe, my dear. You mustn’t worry so,” Lord Willcox said to his wife as she lay in bed, tears in her eyes as she held a handkerchief with a little peppermint in the cloth to help clear her sinuses. She’d been in tears ever since the day before, immediately bed ridden when Gregory and Lord Crawford had returned without Maria, detailing the pirate attack on the port’s market.

“How can I not worry, Fredrick! My little girl is missing and there have been no signs of her since the raid. I know you keep saying that they only stole goods from the market, but that doesn’t explain why she is missing!” Lady Willcox cried, tears slipping from her eyes. Lord Willcox knew that his wife was inconsolable, but he wanted to do his best to soothe her while he had a free moment. He had a meeting with an acquaintance that morning in hopes of finding answers.

A knock sounded on their bedchamber door, and Lord Willcox called for them to enter. The door swung open and Gregory stepped into the room, looking as though he hadn’t slept all night. His blond hair was tousled, and his normally fine attire was replaced by a simple muslin shirt, riding coat and trousers.

“Do you bring news of your sister, Gregory?” Lady Willcox asked as she sat up, her eyes shining with hope as she looked upon her son. But Gregory simply approached his mother, sitting on the side of the bed as he took her weak hand.

“No news, Mother. Simply that I’m riding out with Lord Crawford again this morning,” Gregory explained softly, his body riddled with guilt over the situation. He should have been the one leading Maria by

the arm through the markets, not Lord Crawford. But he knew how much his best friend cared for Maria, and he had even encouraged the man to see if they had a mutual attraction. But the moment Maria had pulled away from Lord Crawford, the gentlemen had continued on a few paces, giving Lord Crawford a moment to speak to Gregory privately about his opinion of Maria returning his affection.

The small distance was all that was needed to be separated from Maria when the crowd began to run in panic. He tried to push against those running towards him, but when he'd gotten shoved to the ground, Lord Crawford had pulled him back up to his feet and to safety, assuring Gregory that Maria had probably run home. But when they made it back to the townhouse, she was nowhere to be seen.

"You find her and you bring her back," Lady Willcox said as her sobs choked her throat, a wail escaping her mouth as she covered it with her handkerchief, gripping onto Gregory's hand for dear life.

"Fear not, Mother. No matter what, Maria will return home," Gregory assured her, drawing his hand back as he stood. He gave his father a simple look, no longer able to speak, but simply gave a curt nod before leaving the room.

Gregory fought his own tears as he walked quickly down the carpeted hallway to the elegant stairway, taking the steps two at a time as he jogged down them to the foyer. He reached the landing just as Mr. Thatcher was opening the front door, revealing Lord Crawford.

"Did she return home in the night?" he asked, a riding hat covering his hair, but the darkness underneath his eyes showed that he too had been awake all night. Gregory hadn't been able to sleep due to the worry that coursed through him. He'd sat by the front door all night, praying that she'd just turn up, safe and out of harm's way.

Gregory shook his head as he took his riding hat from Mr. Thatcher and donned it. "We must notify the papers, speak with the magistrate, and look over the docks again. I'd hate to think she fell into the sea and hasn't been discovered yet," Gregory said, sobs choking his words as he spoke the horrible fears that plagued him.

Lord Crawford gripped his shoulder, forcing Gregory to look into his eyes which were also filled with tears. "Don't lose hope, my friend. We shall do everything in our power this day to locate Miss Maria. We will do what we must to bring her home safely," Lord Crawford declared, giving Gregory enough courage to straighten his posture and follow the man out of the townhouse and to the stables. Gregory needed a fresh horse for the day, and one that would be able to keep up with his demands. They had a lot of work to accomplish.

~\*~

The next time the lock was turned, Maria was ready. She'd taken the time she'd been left alone to clean her face the best she could by drawing her knees to her face and rubbing her cheeks over her dress. She couldn't tell if that helped her appearance, but she greatly hoped so as a pirate stepped into the room.

"Good day, miss," the young man said, coming into the room with a cup and a plate of food. "I've been assured that you wouldn't be giving us any more trouble."

Though his features were young, it appeared as though the years had been hard to this man. His blond hair was cut short, there was an eye patch over his left eye, and he wobbled slightly as he stepped forward. His clothes were rather big, and he didn't appear like the other pirates she'd seen. He didn't even carry a sword at his side.

Maria didn't say anything but simply smiled at the young man, sitting up as he came closer and knelt beside her. The plate he offered her contained little more than boiled potatoes and cold meat. But when the man offered her a bite, she took it without hesitation, chewing quickly since it had been the first thing she'd eaten since breakfast with her family. The food was flavorless, but she was glad to have something filling her stomach again.

"There now, you've done good. Captain will be glad to hear of it," the man said as he raised the cup to her lips, allowing Maria to quickly drink the contents, the liquid refreshing her.

"Thank you," Maria said softly, pulling a smile to her lips as she stared into the man's eyes, causing him to blush. "You've been so kind."

"Ah, it's nothing. Just doing my duties," the man replied, quickly gathering the plate and cup and putting them in his tunic as he stood to leave.

"Really, it means a lot to me," Maria said, causing the man to stop and turn and look at her. It had been a while since this man had had the company of a young lady, and though the room stunk, he couldn't deny she looked beautiful. "But I could really use a chamber pot."

The ship hand looked around the room, realising there wasn't one. "I'll go get you one, miss," he replied with a small smile on his lips as he wobbled from the room, causing Maria to wonder if he had some sort of limp. Maria stood then, stretching her legs but not trying her luck by leaving the room through the door that had been left open. Down the hallway she heard a door open close by to the room she was in, and soon the man returned with a small chamber pot in hand. He

set it in the corner and turned to Maria, obviously proud of his accomplishment.

“You’re such a kind man. Do you think you could untie my hands so I could use the chamber pot?” Maria said sweetly, even turning around slowly to show the man her hands, dried blood covering her fingers.

Maria watched as his brows furrowed, as he was either confused or contemplating what to do. But eventually he seemed to make up his mind as he withdrew a small dagger from his boot and approached her, cutting the cords, and quickly stepped back towards the open door.

“Now, don’t you try anything funny,” the man warned as he replaced his dagger into his boot.

“Of course,” Maria said sweetly. “Whatever could I do on a ship full of pirates? I’ll be sure to behave.” She even winked at the young man despite how much she loathed to do so. But it caused him to smile widely at her before he left the room and shut the door, locking it tight.

Maria sighed as she slightly rubbed her fingers over her sore wrists. Her shoulders ached from having her arms behind her back for so long. She stretched them slowly, not wanting to injure them anymore. Steadily, Maria walked freely over to the chamber pot and took care of her business, feeling more relief than she had since she’d been kidnapped.

Maria then set to work looking through the sacks to see what else she might have in the room with her. But after looking through each one, she realised that they were all empty and dirty, so she tidied them up,

placing them in the corner of the room. She then took the lantern and carefully found a hook for it on one of the rafters above, allowing the light to shine further. Not that the room was very big, just big enough to walk five steps from one side to the other, but at least she could see more clearly.

As she stood, Maria felt the sway of the ship and tried to relax into it instead of constantly trying to fight the motion. She practiced walking around the room, knowing that exercise would be important for keeping her strength up. If she simply sat all the time, she would only become sore and weak. So, for the time being, Maria walked around the room, trying to ignore the smell of the chamber pot which added to the stench of the room in general. Sometimes, she would close her eyes as she walked, envisioning that she was walking through the gardens of her family's townhouse, picturing the flowers that would be in bloom and the vibrant colours of nature around her.

Other times Maria would walk with her hands dancing in front of her as though she was playing a song on the piano. She would picture the music and press the invisible keys in front of her, humming softly to the tune as her fingers moved in front of her. There were very few musical pieces that Maria had memorized over the years, so when she finished exercising her fingers, she simply hummed the songs she knew. After a while, she even started singing a few, pausing every once and a while in her walk around the room to accomplish a rather difficult part in the song. However, her voice became silent the moment the lock sounded again on the door.

Maria quickly moved back towards the furthest wall as a different man stepped into the room, a wide smile on his greasy face. Out of all the men she'd been faced with thus far, this one scared her the most. Even with Geoffrey she'd been able to gather her courage before, but not this man. He was short with a large, round belly, a rapier and cutlass by his sides, and when he stepped forward with a cup, his tunic jingled as though he had several knives hidden there.



“Water, for the beautiful singer,” he said, holding the cup out to Maria. She took it carefully, trying to give the man a smile even though she was full of fear. He smiled in return, his eyes roaming over her body in such a way that it made her shiver. When she was finished, she quickly handed it back to him.

“Come now, won’t you sing for me?” the man asked, a wicked grin crossing his face as he neared her, reaching out his hand and running a finger over the ends of her hair.

“Perhaps for a bucket of water and rags,” Maria said as she stepped away from him. “I want to rid this room of the stench and would clean it myself.”

The pirate nodded as he looked around the room, loathe to be standing there when it smelled so nasty. But he couldn’t help wanting to take a risk to see the beautiful captive James had brought on board. He was thinking that the risk had been worth it as he turned his eyes back on the young lady.

“I’ll gather the things you need and allow you to clean this pigsty if you promise to sing while you work,” the man offered, crossing his arms and grinning at the young lady. Her voice was heavenly to him, and though he didn’t dare force himself onto her, he could at least enjoy a few simple pleasures with her.

“You have a deal, sir,” Maria said, a smile on her face as she nodded her head. She folded her hands before her as the man left the room then, locking the door behind him. Maria didn’t know what she’d gotten herself into by agreeing to do this, but she hoped that in the end she’d be able to have a cleaner space without having to do any other favors for the grotesque man.

## Chapter 7

As the sun had come and gone, so had Gregory's hope of discovering Maria that day. They'd started out by reaching the newspaper and spreading the word that Miss Maria, daughter of Lord Willcox, had been missing since the attack on the port's market by the pirates. Since this attack had been big news, giving the details that the captain of the pirate ship had been pretending to be a privateer, with official documents and all, the fact that a young lady from a prestigious family had also gone missing meant the newspapers were eager to use this new revelation to continue selling papers from Portsmouth to London. Everyone in all of England would not only learn of the news of the attack, but the tragedy of the missing young lady, presumed kidnapped or dead.

Gregory had felt worse after visiting *The British Press*, *The Courier*, *The Globe*, and *the Statesmen* with Lord Crawford, but had a bit of hope when they turned their task to visiting with local magistrates. They gained visits with several prestigious magistrates in the area, and even one court judge as they told the story of the attack and how his sister was now missing. But no matter what official he talked to, they all seemed to give him the same advice. To either wait until a body had been discovered, or until a letter arrived demanding a ransom. Though he was reassured that his family would be notified if the local officials did find anything, it only left Gregory with less hope.

And when he and Lord Crawford had returned to the scene of the attack, Gregory felt like he was going to be sick. Merchants were working hard to repair their stalls, but it was otherwise empty. No one was shopping today because all of the sellers had little to offer. The pirates acting as privateers had been successful at stealing valued goods and killing anyone who got in their way. Though there had been a few brave souls who had fought against the pirates with their flintlock pistols, very few pirates were killed compared to the number of English lives that had been lost.

As Gregory and Lord Crawford questioned everyone they met over the whereabouts of Maria, Gregory couldn't help think that it would have been easier if they had found Maria's body with the others that had been slain, simply because then he would know what had happened to Maria. The not knowing part of the whole experience was really starting to take a toll on him.

As the sun set, Gregory knew he needed to return home, and that his parents would want to know what had become of him and what he'd been able to learn throughout the day. He loathed to return without hope or some comforting news that would soothe his mother and father. He turned his head from Lord Crawford as they rode back towards the townhouse, tears threatening to fall from his eyes.

"We will not fail," Lord Crawford said softly, riding close to Gregory as they made their way through the streets.

"How can you say that after everything we've been through this day? The newspaper took our story like mad feigns, the local officials pacified us with their words, and none of the merchants remember seeing Maria that day. How have we not already failed?" Gregory demanded, his anger building within him- an emotion that he wasn't used to feeling.

"Because we haven't given up, Gregory. It is the moment we stop trying that all hope is lost," Lord Crawford said, speaking sternly with the hope of inspiring his dear friend again. Though he couldn't imagine what Lord Willcox and his family were enduring, he also knew where his heart belonged.

Gregory took a deep breath as they reached the townhouse and

stepped down from their saddles, handing the reins to the stable boy. "You are right, Fitz. I shouldn't give up hope," Gregory said as he shook his friend's hand before ascending the front stairs and opening the front door. As Lord Crawford followed, a plan started to form in his mind that would secure his future with Maria, causing him to smile keenly.

~\*~

By the time Maria had finished her tenth song, her throat sore and voice hoarse, she at least was standing in a small room that no longer smelled and which took on the aroma of the fresh sea. The pirate who had supervised her work, who had eventually told her his name was Jenkins, had even emptied the chamber pot for her and removed the dirty sacks. Maria's hands were soggy from scrubbing the floors with saltwater and a few rags, but at least her hands were clean. And though her muslin dress was dirty from the knees down, she could at least breathe easier now that the smell of rot had disappeared.

She threw her rag in the bucket of dirty water, thankful to be done with the work. Maria had never done this type of chore before; the closest thing to it was when she had helped the gardener one day trim the rose bushes. That sort of work had not affected her body in this way. Now her body ached from all the scrubbing she'd done while her voice rang out with song after song. She turned towards Jenkins, waiting for him to take the bucket and leave, but he simply stood there watching her for a moment as though he was thinking deeply about something. And when a smile crossed his pudgy face, she knew that Jenkins' thoughts couldn't be good.

He approached her, his hand reaching up towards her hair, when the door suddenly swung upon, startling them both. Jenkins quickly took a step back from Maria as he bent down to pick up the dirty bucket of water. Geoffrey stepped into the room, carrying a cup of water and a plate of food, but as his eyes moved from Jenkins to the captive, and back to Jenkins, his eyes narrowed at the short man.

“What do you think you are doing in here, Jenkins?” Geoffrey said in a deep voice, stepping towards Jenkins until the man started to move around Geoffrey and towards the open door.

“I had the wench clean the filthy room, Geoffrey. Nothing else, I swear,” Jenkins said as his hands started to tremble, his eyes darting to the shamshir at Geoffrey’s side, a large and imposing sword he’d seen Geoffrey wield skillfully.

“That was not the orders you had been given today, Jenkins. No one is to enter this room unless they are delivering food and water. Now get out of here before I report you to the Captain,” Geoffrey barked, causing Jenkins to jump and dump some of the dirty water on himself before he ran down the hallway and out of sight.

When Geoffrey turned his eyes back on Maria, she simply looked at him with a small smile on her face. He wasn’t expecting such a reaction since most women cowered before him whenever he yelled. He looked around the room and smelled it cautiously, having to at least agree that the room smelled more pleasant. If only he could say the same for the captive.

“Your food and water, miss,” Geoffrey said as he handed over the cup and plate.

“Thank you, Geoffrey,” Maria said with a smile as she sat, tucking her legs behind her as she began to eat the cooked meat and potatoes with her fingers, finding herself starving from all the work she’d done that day. Geoffrey watched her, thinking that only James ate like that. He chuckled as she finished the food, handing back the plate and then the cup once she drained the contents.

"I'm pleased to see you are behaving yourself, little one," Geoffrey said as he placed the items in his tunic and headed for the door. "And you have a beautiful singing voice. I'm sure the whole crew heard it."

"Thank you, Geoffrey. That is kind of you to say," Maria said, standing as he left the room. Geoffrey gave her a final look, giving her a nod with the same none-existent facial expression before shutting the door and locking it.

Maria took a deep breath as she settled against the wall of the ship, resting her head back as she looked at the door. She focused on her breathing, thankful to be saved from Jenkins, truly fearful of what he'd had planned for her before Geoffrey interrupted him. Perhaps with being discovered, Jenkins wouldn't try to risk anything with her again. Though, Maria couldn't deny how pleased she was with having a cleaner space to reside in until she learned more about what the pirates had planned for her.

As she sat and stretched, exhaustion starting to steal over her, Maria thought about how she could escape. For now, she'd continue to try to gain the trust of these pirates and perhaps earn some time on the top deck. She would be happy to breathe fresh air again, and perhaps find a change of clothes. Though she doubted that pirates kept spare clothing for women, she did hope she could find something that would suit her and be much cleaner than what she currently wore.

As her eyes drifted shut, Maria's mind turned to the mysterious man who had captured her on the docks. She thought of his dark hair and how it fell over his face as he looked down to her, his body tall and his shoulders broad like a mighty warrior. She felt warmth in her body as she thought of his bare chest, his tanned skin, his muscles toned in a way that made him appear like the Greek gods she'd seen carved out of marble and placed in the museum in London. Indeed, he was an

image of a god with the mysterious gaze of a foreigner.

The last thing Maria thought of as she drifted towards sleep was his dark green eyes, his rough facial skin where a beard was growing, and his full lips. If given a chance, would she kiss such a man? Would she allow him to take her into his strong arms and offer her pleasure instead of pain? Maria giggled in her sleep at the very thought of such an encounter, giving her one happy thought in a sea of despair.

~\*~

It was late at night, after dinner had been served, and Lord Willcox had Mrs. Bath take his wife a plate of food to eat and with orders to draw her a soothing bath. The three gentlemen then sat in the drawing room enjoying their port. Both Lord Willcox and Gregory looked exhausted and in despair as they looked at the contents of the glasses, silently praying for answers. Lord Crawford almost couldn't contain his glee as he prepared his speech mentally. When he was ready, he cleared his throat, gaining the other two gentlemen's attention.

"My good sirs, I want to propose an idea that has come to my mind. As you know, my uncle, Lord Cardinal, has always kept company with the military. One of his close friends is an admiral in the navy. I should write to my uncle immediately in London to see if he could call upon his friend and send word to his ships at sea for a pirate pocket ship disguised as a privateer vessel in hopes of locating Maria," Lord Crawford said, appearing to be inspired, though he'd had the same idea all morning. He had waited to use this bit of information at the most opportune moment.

"My goodness, Lord Crawford, what a splendid idea," Lord Willcox exclaimed as he sat forward in his wing backed chair and set his glass of port on the small glass table nearby.

"I only wish it had come to me sooner. In fact, I think I'll ride for London at first light and speak with my uncle in person. In London, I'm sure I could use my many connections to see if anyone else might be able to get a letter to ships abroad that might be able to find Maria," Lord Crawford said, really reeling them into his plan.

"That's a wonderful plan, Fitz. I shall ride with you, and together our description should help the admiral find this pirate ship," Gregory said, hope shining in his eyes for the first time in hours. Lord Crawford smiled inwardly as these two gentlemen looked towards him as their savior.

"Certainly, Gregory. I'm sure it will give Lady Willcox great comfort to know that we'll ride to London in the morning to seek the help of my uncle's dear friend in the navy," Lord Crawford agreed, nodding his head as though he thought it was a splendid idea when in truth he'd rather have gone alone. "But I do have a confession to make," Lord Crawford added, drawing in their attention.

"And what is that, Lord Crawford?" Lord Willcox asked as he furrowed his brow at the younger man.

"For some time now, I've had my thoughts set on Miss Maria as being my bride. I would ask, Lord Crawford, that you'd consider allowing me to propose to your daughter upon her safe return to England," Lord Crawford explained calmly, watching as the man looked at him with wide eyes.

"Of course, Lord Crawford. I'm sure Maria would be pleased to know that the man that orchestrated her rescue was you, and that you intend to marry." Lord Willcox readily agreed, having already known



that the two would make a lovely match many years ago. He was delighted with both Lord Crawford's plan of action and his confession of having feelings for his daughter.

"I agree, sir, and hope she'll feel the same way for me as I do for her," Lord Crawford replied as he turned towards Gregory. "And surely I would have her brother's good graces as well."

Gregory regarded Lord Crawford for a moment, remembering a rumor from the last time he was in Town for Maria's Season. "I'm sure you'd make Maria very happy," Gregory replied, not wanting to bring the rumor into the conversation at this time. He didn't want to upset his father any more by falsely accusing Lord Crawford, and though Fitz had been his good friend for many years, he had a high opinion of Maria and wanted to see her end up in the best of hands. At this time, he wasn't sure if his best friend was good enough for his sister.

"Then it's settled. At first light we ride to Town and visit with my uncle. We'll visit with every gentlemen of good breeding with connections to a ship at sea if we have to," Lord Crawford declared as he rose from his seat, the other two gentlemen rising with him. "Till then, good evening, gentlemen."

Lord Crawford set his glass of fine brandy on a side table and nodded to Lord Willcox, and then to Gregory, before leaving the drawing room and heading for the front door. Once the drawing room door was pulled closed tightly behind him, he finally allowed his glee to shine forth as he smiled brightly, his plan for claiming Maria's hand in marriage already being put in place.

"Maria, you are mine," Lord Crawford whispered as he descended the townhouse, already imagining his wedding night.

## Chapter 8

James was in the belly of the ship, working with the other crew members to paint over the various shipping symbols on the crates the pirates had stolen. Afterwards, they'd paint Tripoli shipping symbols on the crates in case they were interceded by another ship. As he worked, sweat dripping from his body in the humid ship, James' thoughts turned back to the captive on the other side of the ship. From the talk of the other men she'd started to cooperate, eating her meals and even being willing to work to clean her own space that she was being held in. James could only wonder how she'd convinced Jenkins and Louis, the ship hand, to aid her, but he could only guess she'd used female charm. Paired with her good looks, he couldn't blame the men for falling for it.

However, now that they'd been out to sea for almost a week, there had been no word from the Captain on what he had planned for the young lady. Her value was based on several different pieces of information that they currently did not have, from her name and social status in England, to the current demands of one such as her for either a slave or a concubine. If she was indeed a virgin, James knew that she would be worth a high price in the slave market along the Barbary Coast. Perhaps Captain Maidus would keep her until he found the highest bidder for her purity, if that be the case.

"Geoffrey, you've been with the captive. What do you think should be done with her?" James called out as Geoffrey was lifting and moving the crates with ease so the men had an easier time painting them.

"Why do you ask, James? Do you want her all for yourself?" Geoffrey asked with a wink, though his face remained showing the same stoic appearance.

“No, Geoffrey. I am simply thinking like a pirate. What would be the best use of her? Ransom her for money, sell her as a slave...”

“Or keep her as the ship’s wench!” Jenkins added in, but that only earned him a glare from Geoffrey, causing Jenkins to slink away and go to work on other crates.

“The easiest and most convenient thing to do would be to sell her as a slave,” Leonardo piped up, passing around a water skin for all the men to take a quick swig of before they got back to their work.

“If we are going with the easiest method, then we should just kill her,” Geoffrey said with a shrug of his shoulders, even as he carried a heavy crate to the other side of the ship’s belly.

James sighed as he thought about it more, wondering what he would do if he was the captain of a ship. A more personal thought came to him as he thought of Jenkins’ idea. If he was indeed captain of his own crew, he would have kept her in his private quarters before he made a decision instead of leaving her in a slave room.

“Perhaps you should bring it up over dinner with the Captain,” Leonardo said as he captured James’ attention. “Then you would know what a captain would do.”

James nodded his head, knowing that his mentor was right. And though he did his best to focus on his work, his thoughts always lingered back on the green-eyed young lady that he couldn’t deny was fierce and beautiful.

The next morning in Portsmouth brought with it a new feeling of determination within Gregory. As he readied for his trip to London, his footman already taking his packed bags down to his waiting horse, Gregory said silent prayers that he and Fitz would be warmly welcomed by his uncle and gain permission to speak to this admiral about rescuing Maria. When no reports of a body being washed up on shore reached Lord Willcox's house, Gregory knew in his heart that his dear sister had been kidnapped by the pirates.

As Gregory left his room, donning his riding trousers, boots, and coat, he stopped in the hallway outside his parents' bedchamber and knocked lightly on the door. He heard his mother's soft voice and entered, the room dark from having the curtains drawn over the windows. A few candles lit the room, giving Gregory enough light to reach his mother and sit beside her bed on a chair that had been brought over for such a thing.

He took her hand as he gazed into her tired eyes. "My boy," she said, "my sweet, sweet boy. You must come home with your sister."

Gregory smiled as he looked at his frail mother, fearing the worst would happen while he was away. He didn't want to leave home but knew that he must see Fitz's plan through. He kissed his mother's cool hand and laid it back down on the bed covers. "Then you, Mother, must be well by the time I return with good news about Maria's return. She'll not want to see you so melancholy when she comes to see you," Gregory said as he looked into his mother's tear-stained face.

"I just don't know what I'll do if I lose her, Gregory. She's supposed to be getting married, not living in fear with dreadful pirates," Lady

Willcox said, her voice soft and barely over a whisper.

“Shush now, Mother. We both know how strong-willed Maria is. She’s probably talked those men into submission and charmed the Captain into releasing her,” Gregory said with a smile, a faint one showing on Lady Willcox’s lips. “Fear not, Mother. All will be well.”

Gregory leaned forward and placed a kiss on his mother’s head, silently pleading that she would be well by the time he returned with some real news. He squeezed her hand one last time and headed for the bedchamber door. There, he opened it and looked back at his mother one last time before stepping out of the room and closing it behind him. As he walked down the hallway, he prayed that he hadn’t looked upon his mother for the last time in his life.

~\*~

Maria had been walking again, humming softly as she ran through her mind stories of novels she’d read in the past. Sometimes she would imagine herself as the heroine in the novels, living and doing adventitious things, allowing her mind to forget where she was for a short time. It was in this manner that she was found when the door was unlocked and Louis limped into the room with a bundle in his arms.

“Hello, Louis. How are you doing today?” Maria asked with a smile. When the young man had returned to give her the dinner meal last night, she’d learned his name and a bit about his past. Having been born with a lame leg, he’d been dismissed from doing much work and earning an income. But it had been Captain Maidus who’d hired him as a ship hand, being strong enough to do small things for the crew, and he could tend to all the slaves when the ship was full. Louis had explained that he’d lost his eye during a skirmish at sea, the shrapnel from a cannon hitting the deck where he was, damaging his eye

beyond repair.

“I’m well as I can be, miss. I’ve brought you a small bundle of extra clothes. Granted, they’re for men, but they’re cleaner than what ye have on,” Louis explained, his cheeks turning pink at the thought of her undressing. “And here is some salted pork. Not much, but better than nothing.”

Maria took the small satchel from Louis and peered inside to see the salted meat, trying to be grateful when she didn’t know when the next time she would eat would be. “Thank you, Louis. That is very kind of you. And I’m sure I’ll find something comfortable to wear with the things you’ve brought,” Maria said kindly, trying to pacify the young man and win his trust. Already he’d shown his kindness to her and she wanted to repay him for it the best way she could. She was just happy to meet someone so kind in a place like this.

“Have a good day, miss,” Louis said, wincing at his words. It dawned on him again that this young lady was a captive and not just another young lady. “I’m sorry,” he added as he opened the door.

“There is nothing for you to be sorry for, Louis. You’re not the one who captured me,” Maria replied, truly meaning her words. Louis just nodded in reply as he stepped out of the open door and locked it behind him once he’d closed it.

Maria sighed as she went to the bundle, setting her satchel of salted meat aside as she knelt and looked at the various clothes. She wasn’t surprised that she couldn’t find a dress, so instead she started looking over the trousers, trying to find a pair that would fit her best. Then, she found a small cotton shirt that had all its buttons, allowing her to fasten it securely once she put it on. She also found a decent vest and tunic to go with it.

“Looks decent enough,” Maria said as she held out the clothes, making her final decision. Not knowing how long she’d be left alone, Maria quickly took off her gown, followed by her petticoat, stay, and shift. She already felt better being rid of the filthy garments as she tossed them aside and pulled on the trousers, followed by the cotton shirt that she quickly buttoned to the bottom of her chin. Once she had the vest and tunic on, she felt well enough covered.

Next, she looked at the other clothes, taking out a shirt from the bundle and tugging on it until it ripped into small rags. She started eating the salted meat, then using her saliva to spit onto the rags she used the damp rags to scrub her arms and face, trying to rid her skin of the grime and stench. It was a small improvement, but at least she was feeling better.

Maria couldn’t help but smile as she finished her small meal and tasks at hand. She’d never have imagined herself doing such a thing in her entire life and wondered that if at a later point in time she could use her experiences in a novel. She knew that no one would believe that a lady, born and raised in luxury and higher education, would ever do such a thing as don men’s clothing and use spit to clean herself. No, these details were only fit for a book that other young ladies would read and laugh over.

But the more she thought about writing a novel of her experience upon a pirate ship, the more she realised just how uncertain her future was. She still had no idea what the Captain’s plans were for her, and not one of the pirates who had come to this room had asked for her name. They were being careful around her, biding their time. Surely, she would learn of their plans soon enough.

James sat at the small dining table that was used to feed the Captain and his small chosen few. He sat next to Leonardo, possibly the oldest man on the ship, and thus the most respected pirate of them all so who dined with a few of the other crew members, while the majority of the men ate in their bunks below. While most were fed potatoes and gruel, tonight James was able to enjoy cooked chicken, fresh vegetables, and a full cup of wine. He knew that it was only his obedience and dedication over the years that had earned him the right to sit at the Captain's table. These men might be pirates, but they were all loyal to their Captain.

"Captain Maidus, about the captive young lady. Have there been any plans made for her?" James asked towards the end of the meal, when Captain Maidus had lit his pipe, signaling that soon they'd have to leave his quarters.

Captain Maidus regarded the young man, contemplating his motives for asking such a question. But deep down he knew that James was a pirate at heart and only asked the question with good intentions towards him as the Captain, and not for his own personal gain, like so many of the crew members often did.

"I have not made a decision and would appreciate the opinion of my trusted few," Captain Maidus replied, casting his gaze around at the handful of men.

"We should just be rid of the girl, Captain. She'll just be a burden in the long run and could be disposed of tonight. Then there is no more issue with her," one of the men said, opening his hands before the Captain as if to say that it was an easy answer to a problem.

"What about leaving her at the next port? We stop in southern Spain before entering our home's sea. Why not leave her there, a British



young lady amongst all the Spaniards. I'm sure that would go over well with the two monarchs," another said with a laugh, causing a round of laughter to fall upon the table.

"As humorous as that would be, the most profitable idea would be to sell her as a slave," Leonardo spoke up, trying to be the reasonable one.

"Why sell her as a slave when she could be our slave? A woman on the ship would be to our advantage and overall morality while sailing," Jenkins spoke up, a cruel glee in his eyes.

Captain Maidus simply chuckled at that comment as his eyes roamed over those at the table. "I agree with Leonardo that she would be worth a price at the slave markets. Though, I think she could be of some use," he said, causing Jenkins to perk up, hoping that his idea would come true. "James, since you were the one who captured her, I want you to go and collect her now and bring her before this table. I've decided that she'll work till we reach Tripoli. Then we can decide from there."

Those around the table mumbled their agreement as James rose from the table and commenced to do as he was ordered, hoping that this young lady wouldn't give him any trouble as he brought her before the Captain. There was a lot she could attempt between the slave quarters and the Captain's personal ones.

## Chapter 9

Having already received her evening meal, Maria was surprised to hear the lock on the door snap open before the door was pushed in. Maria stood from the place on the floor she'd been resting her legs after spending much of the day walking and daydreaming, feeling the sway of the ship around her. She was surprised when the man she'd been thinking often about stepped into the room.

When James unlocked the door and stepped into the room, he wasn't expecting what he saw before him. Not only had the room been scrubbed clean, freeing the humid area of rank smells, but the young lady he'd captured had been transformed from a common English woman into a lady of the sea. The trousers she wore fit her shapely legs nicely, and though she wore a cotton, button-up shirt, with both a vest and tunic, the layers still couldn't hide her pleasantly shaped bosom.

James stood and stared for several moments, pleasant ideas of how he'd strip her of those wayfaring clothes slipping through his mind, causing him to force that train of thought away as he remembered his orders. But it was hard to look at her as she crossed her arms over her chest, a victorious smile across her face, her golden hair pulled back from her face with what reminded him of a kerchief. The woman before him was certainly not the young lady he'd captured. No, this woman possessed fiery determination.

"I see you've been busy," James spoke up, finally finding his voice as he stepped further into the room, admiring her shapely figure in the fitting clothes that left little to the imagination.

“I’ve simply done what you’ve told me to do. Behave and such. But I couldn’t help making a few friends, too,” Maria said with a wink as she fought back the smile that wanted to creep upon her face. She was trying to remain confident and assertive and didn’t want her glee of surprising her capturer getting in the way of how she was trying to present herself.

“I’ve never heard of an English woman making friends with pirates,” James said, a smirk crossing his features as he viewed the woman before him.

“Well, English women have to make do, sometimes,” Maria replied. “So, why are you here? You’ve brought no food or water, so I’m sure there must be another reason.”

James focused again on the task at hand, remembering that the Captain was waiting on him. “Captain Maidus has requested your presence at his dining table. He is to bring you before his most trusted men to decide your fate,” James explained, a sternness in his voice that sent chills down her spine. For a moment he’d almost been flirting with her, but now it was clear to Maria that he was there on official business.

Not willing to show fear in front of her capturer, Maria squared her shoulders and gestured towards the hallway. “Well, lead the way then,” she said, a small smile on her lips to show that she wasn’t afraid of what lay ahead of her.

James was surprised since most of the time he had to lead slaves kicking and screaming anytime he transferred them, but this young lady didn’t seem to be bothered by anything he said. He had to give her credit that she was the fiercest woman he’d ever met.

Leading the captive into the hallway, James kept a close eye on her as they traveled down the hallway that was barely lit with lantern light. Then, they ascended the narrow wooden stairs that Maria remembered all too well from when she'd been first kidnapped. When the pirate opened the door at the top of the stairs, sunlight flooded into the space, forcing Maria to cover her eyes with her arm. She felt the man in front of her pull her arm, encouraging her to keep moving.

As Maria stepped onto the top deck, it took her a few moments to gain her sight. As she looked all around her, she saw the ship's deck stretch far ahead of her, and further she saw that they were completely surrounded by water, with no land in sight. On the horizon she saw the setting sun, the sky cast in hues of pink and orange, a sight that Maria thought was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

The sway of the ship caused Maria to lose her footing as she stumbled and reached towards her capturer, who was quick to catch her, folding his strong arms around her as he held her close to his chest. He looked down into her eyes that were surprised that he'd caught her, and when she could feel a low rumble of laughter in his chest, she straightened her posture and regained her footing.

"It seems ye haven't gotten your sea legs yet," her capturer said as he took her arm and hooked it around his so that he could help steady her for the rest of the way.

If they'd been in England, Maria could imagine that she was taking a stroll with a gentleman through the park. Instead, her capturer led her across the ship's deck towards the wheelhouse, with the breeze from the sea whipping around them. Around her she spotted various pirates who stopped and stared at her. Some would look at her with lusty eyes while others would glare at her. A few even spit in her direction as though she were filth. Maria decided to keep her eyes in front of her and not pay them any attention.

“These are Captain Maidus’ personal quarters,” the pirate explained as he led her to a door underneath the wheelhouse, dropping her arm from his before he knocked loudly on the door. When a man inside beckoned them to enter, the pirate opened the door and stepped inside with Maria closely following.

“James, my boy. You’ve finally brought this beauty to meet me. I dare say, what a beautiful young lady indeed. And so fitting for the sea,” the man at the head of a dining table said, pointing his finger at Maria and laughing. Maria stopped moving, unsure of where in the room she should go or what she was supposed to do next. Maria gazed around the table as her capturer sat next to Leonardo. At least a few of pirates she could recognize. They laughed at her apparel until their mirth subsided, with the man at the head of the table standing.

“Forgive me, my dear. Never in my years would I have imagined an English lady dressed like a lady of the sea,” he said, approaching her. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Captain Maidus of the Emerald.” The man bowed and Maria curtsied out of habit. “Ah, I see you are of fine breeding.”

The man then took her hand and tucked it in his arm as he led her to the front of the table, pulling out a chair for her, and as she sat, he even tucked it in like a true gentleman would. As the Captain took his seat at the head of the table Maria heard several inappropriate jokes being said about her, that perhaps they’d rather keep her as their personal slave, but she refused to lose her composure, instead remaining calm and refusing to look at them even though her heart pounded against her chest.

“Now, my dear. Now that I’ve introduced myself, why don’t you tell us a little bit about yourself,” Captain Maidus asked, gesturing to the pirates that sat at the table. But Maria didn’t take her eyes off the Captain as she spoke.

“My name is Miss Maria Livingston. My father is Lord Willcox, Earl of Wiltshire. My family and I live in Portsmouth since my father’s business deals with trades and ships,” Maria explained, never wavering or crumbling to emotions even though she felt terrified under these pirates’ ever watching eyes. Murmuring broke out around her, but still she didn’t look away from the Captain’s dark blue eyes.

“Well, well. That does change things a bit. I’m sure a debutante such as yourself would take some time to learn how a ship runs,” Captain Maidus said as he sat back in his chair and began to think. There was the possibility of earning more by ransoming this young lady back to her father than he’d make with all the cargo below deck. However, he wasn’t known to hold hostages, or ever let them leave the ship alive. No, Captain Maidus knew the best course of action for this socialite. All the while, Maria sat quietly, waiting for this Captain’s verdict.

“I’ll make you a deal, Miss Maria,” Captain Maidus said as he leaned forward and looked at the young lady, his plan coming to mind as he spoke. “If you work hard, just like my good men here, then I’ll treat you like one of the crew. You’ll have as equal treatment as anyone of this ship. You’ll have plenty to eat and drink, and I’m sure I could put together some creature comforts for you during your stay upon the Emerald.” Captain Maidus gestured to the fine things that he kept in his cabin. “Perhaps you see something here that you’d like.”

Maria was shocked by the offer, having expected to be told that she was going to be sold, or perhaps even killed. Never would she have imagined that the captain of the ship would offer her a working position or would be willing to treat her with such kindness.

Maria sat quietly for a few minutes, gazing at the fine things from all over the world that the Captain kept. But the plush bedding was what caught her eyes. Captain Maidus followed her eyes and stood to

approach the plush pillow and thick blanket.

“Ah, I see you have spotted a fine piece indeed. Especially for those who are sailing,” Captain Maidus said as he picked up the pillow and blanket and handed them to Maria. “I give these to you as a sign of trust and mutual understanding.”

“Thank you, Captain Maidus,” Maria said as she held the items to her chest, thinking that perhaps she could actually get a decent night of sleep with a real pillow and blanket. They felt silky in her hands and smelled of rich spices. Maria felt that she had gone without such luxuries that she was used to for so long that she’d almost forgotten what a silk pillow felt like.

“My pleasure, my dear. But I must warn you. If you try to escape or misbehave, there will be punishment, just like there is punishment for any of my men who don’t obey my orders or who try to abandon ship,” Captain Maidus said with a serious tone, though he kept a pleasant smile on his face.

“Understandable,” was all Maria replied with. With a flick of his hand, Captain Maidus dismissed those at his table. Maria watched as they left without a word, and she watched the one who’d captured her, now knowing that his name was James.

“Now, my dear. Let me show you to your private quarters. I can’t very well have you sleeping with the other men,” Captain Maidus said with a wink as he stood and gestured for Maria to follow him. Maria obeyed, holding the pillow and blanket to her chest.

As the Captain opened the door and led Maria outside, they were greeted by the fresh wind of the sea. Maria took a deep breath, feeling

as though it had been ages since she had fresh air to breathe. The Captain led her around the wheelhouse and up a flight of stairs towards the ship's wheel deck and then opened a narrow door, revealing another small room inside.

"Now, I know it's not much," Captain Maidus said as he held the door open for Maria as she stepped into the small space. Though it was fairly clean and smelled of fresh air, and included a small porthole, it was terribly small. "But it's the safest room on the ship. You'll be above my quarters and near the helm of the ship. If any of my men were to try something with you, I'd hear it," Captain Maidus explained, giving her another wink.

Maria smiled at the Captain even though she felt terror inside her chest. How could she be expected to work on a pirate ship when she'd never worked a day in her life? Besides scrubbing the room clean that she'd been held in last, she'd never scrubbed a single thing before. Could she really live like a pirate and do what they did every day on a ship? Regardless of whether or not Maria thought she could do the work, she knew that she must if she wanted to survive and find a way off this ship in the future.

"I appreciate your consideration, Captain Maidus. You've really thought of everything," Maria said, trying to still appear innocent and trustworthy.

"I always do, my dear, I always do," the Captain said before shutting the door. This time, Maria didn't hear a lock being turned and wondered if she could really be safe in this room. At least, she thought, as she set out the blanket and pillow, she wasn't stuck below deck anymore and had gained a bit of freedom. Even the porthole above allowed the last bits of sunlight to come into the area, but she knew soon that it would be completely dark.



As she lay on top of the blanket and rested her head on the plush pillow, she sighed, at least relieved to be sleeping on something a little more comfortable. She closed her eyes and listened to the waves around her, a sound she would have normally enjoyed listening to. Now it was a sign that she was completely surrounded by water with no way to escape.

For a while she thought about Captain Maidus; that with a shorter hairstyle and the latest clothes in men's ware, he would fit in perfectly amongst the Bon Ton of London. The more she thought about his words, the more she wondered if he'd ever spent time in London because he sure understood her upbringing and even a few customs such as greetings and such. But when she thought about looking into his dark, blue eyes, a feeling stole over her, making her think that there was something about the man that she couldn't trust.

Though Captain Maidus had given her partial freedom, to work on the pirate ship and be treated like an equal, she also knew that there were no other women upon the ship and that a lady such as herself surely couldn't last very long doing the work of a pirate. Maybe in time she could learn how the ship was maintained properly. She could learn to work, gain the strength needed for such a task, and be able to follow orders. But could she really steal from people? Could she join the other pirates in raids, in stealing goods from ports, and killing anyone who got in her way? Would she end up like Louis one day, broken from a skirmish at sea?

As Maria drifted off, the swaying of the ship lolling her to sleep, Maria knew that she would have to keep surviving every day until an opportunity arose that would allow her to escape these pirates once and for all.

## Chapter 10

The morning came with a startle for Maria as banging sounded on her shanty door. “Wake up, ye scallywag! The morning waits for no man, or woman aboard the Emerald,” came a booming voice that caused Maria to jump back in surprise. Her mind was foggy as she quickly looked around the small space, the sounds of the ocean mixed with the grunts of men filling her ears. A second later it came into her mind the deal she’d made with Captain Maidus the night before.

Standing to her feet, Maria pulled open the door and was faced with a tall lengthy man with a hawk-like nose. His arms were folded over his chest as he peered down at Maria, his dark eyes narrowing at her. “The name’s Horus, and I’m the Captain’s second in command. I’m the one who dishes out the orders on behalf of the Captain, so ye better listen up,” the man said, gesturing for her to follow him.

“Now, I don’t have time to be following a green thumb around all day, so I’m assigning you to Leonardo. If any man on this ship has patience to deal with an inexperienced woman, it’s him,” Horus continued as Maria followed him quickly down the stairs of the wheelhouse and onto the ship’s main deck. The man walked quickly as Maria did her best to keep up with barely a spare moment to rub the sleep from her eyes.

She tried to keep her composure, show that she wasn’t afraid, but it didn’t help that the other pirates often stared at her. Finally feeling awake, Maria raised her chin and walked proudly, taking in deep breaths of the sea and even casting glances at the rising sun as it sent rays of light over the water’s surface. Maria had never been on a ship before that was out to sea and could find small pleasures in it.

Maria followed Horus across the main deck and down a narrow set of stairs near the stern of the ship. The humidity was far worse in this section of the ship, and she was quick to discover why. At the end of the stairs, it opened up into a small make-shift kitchen with strange smells emitting from the space. Maria crinkled her nose at such a smell, but soon spotted Leonardo coming from the kitchen, carrying various bundles. He stopped dead in his tracks once he spotted Horus and Maria.

“Oh no, ye don’t, Horus. You can’t possibly think the lady would be suited with me,” Leonardo said as he examined Maria. She was clearly disheveled from being woken suddenly, her hair a bit of a mess, but no less beautiful.

“You did a fine job teaching fresh skin all these years. I’m sure you can handle a woman,” Horus said with a sneer before turning on his heels and leaving the way he came, leaving Maria with Leonardo.

The older pirate looked at Maria a moment and released a loud sigh. He shook his head and handed his bundles to Maria, the weight of them almost causing her legs to buckle. But she’d vowed to herself that she wouldn’t allow these men to see weakness in her.

“Take those to the main deck and I’ll be right up the stairs with another load. You can help me dish out the morning rations and so forth,” Leonardo said as he turned and ducked back into the kitchen. Maria didn’t wait for Leonardo to come back out and simply turned back towards the stairs, her muscles straining as she carried the two large bundles up the stairs and onto the deck, the smell within making her stomach feel sour.

With a quickness that Maria couldn’t believe, Leonardo appeared at her side with two bundles of equal weight, and he moved with the

same speed as he stopped every pirate he crossed paths with, giving them a piece of the salted meat. Maria did her best to hold the bundles for Leonardo, thankful that she wasn't the one passing the meat out, because most of the pirates glared at her or chewed their food in a disgusting matter that forced Maria to look away. They were obviously enjoying teasing her.

But there were a few pirates who didn't act like this. When Leonardo and Maria came by with their morning ration, they not only quickly ate their small meal, but thanked Leonardo *and* Maria for it, some even casting Maria a small smile as they moved on. Men like Jenkins would give her a lusty sneer, while Geoffrey and Louis parted with a kinder smile.

When they came upon James, Maria focused her eyes upon the man. He was leaning against the gunwale, pulling buckets of water from the sea for another waiting pirate. Maria enjoyed watching the way the muscles in his arms moved with each pull of the rope, causing Maria to lose focus for a moment. It wasn't until Leonardo spoke up that she realised she was staring.

"Morning, James. Sustenance for ye," Leonardo said as he handed out the last bites of salted meat to the pirates. Once James had pulled the last buckets back onto the ship, he took the meat from Leonardo and quickly ate it, smearing his hands on his trousers before he resumed his work, his mouth still chewing. He didn't say a word in response as he focused on the task at hand.

Maria felt a little deflated that he hadn't said anything to her, but as Leonardo started to walk away, carrying the empty bundles in his arms, and Maria quickly followed after. As they made their way back towards the ship's kitchen, Maria stole a glance over her shoulder and was surprised to see James looking at her for a moment before throwing two buckets back into the sea and pulling on their ropes the moment they filled with water. Maria felt like she could watch James work all day, but instead turned her eyes back on Leonardo,

wondering what tasks he'd have for her next.

~\*~

The sun was setting when Gregory and Fitz made it to London. They'd ridden their steeds at a fast pace, not even stopping at the stagecoach stops along the way to rest or eat a bite of food. They both had the pressing need to reach Lord Cardinal in order to speak to him about the matter.

As they journeyed, Gregory had tried to picture Maria in his mind, praying that she was at least safe no matter where she was. He prayed continuously for his sister, sometimes thinking about his mother and her frail health, but mostly hoping that Fitz's uncle would be willing to offer them aid.

"It's not much further now," Fitz said as they entered the main streets of London, the congestion of the road causing them to slow their horses and make their way between all the coaches and people walking the streets. Gregory was thankful that the sun was already setting because he knew that his appearance must be worse for wear. In London, he always felt like society's eyes were on him constantly as the next heir to the Willcox title. So, for just this once, he wanted to blend into everyone around him and only focus on finding a way to rescue Maria.

"His house is here on Wimpole Street, Gregory. I doubt my letter this morning has reached him because we were sure to have traveled faster than any post. But I'm sure he'll welcome us warmly," Fitz said as they turned onto a street that was largely deserted. More than likely the prestigious families that lived on this street were attending their dinners and evening gatherings.

As they approached the house, Fitz quickly dismounted from his horse, with Gregory right behind them as they quickly tied the reins of their horses to the front post and walked up the small path to the front door. A few moments after Fitz had pulled the doorbell, a footman opened the door, his eyes growing wide at the sight of Fitz.

“Lord Crawford. What a surprise. I don’t believe Lord Cardinal was expecting you,” the man said as he opened the door all the way for the gentlemen to enter.

“My apologies, Mr. Stevens, but I’ve come to talk to my uncle about an important matter concerning my best friend, Lord Willcox’s son,” Fitz explained as they stepped into the foyer while the footman closed the door behind them.

“Please, come into the parlor. You look exhausted from your travels,” Mr. Stevens offered, taking their riding hats and coats. “I’ll have Mrs. Nettle tell Cook to make room at the dinner table for two more.”

“We don’t mean to be an inconvenience,” Gregory spoke up, not wanting to trouble Lord Cardinal.

“Nonsense, Mr. Livingston. Lord Cardinal will surely be happy to have company this evening,” Mr. Stevens reassured them as he showed the way to the parlor.

Once they were left alone, Gregory sat heavily into a wing backed chair, resting his heads on the sides as he took several deep breaths. The sound of glass moving caused him to open his eyes and see that Fitz was filling two glasses of brandy from a side table near the fireplace.

“I think we’ve deserved these before dinner,” Fitz said as he handed Gregory a glass. Though he didn’t want to impose upon Lord Cardinal, he was hoping Fitz’s uncle would forgive him for not waiting for the man to offer him a glass.

Gregory quickly drained the contents and handed it back to Fitz, the liquid seeming to relax his sore muscles for a moment. By the time Fitz had returned the glasses to the table and taken to a seat across from him, the parlor door was being opened as Lord Cardinal strolled quickly into the room.

“My boy, Fitz! What a pleasant surprise to see you,” Lord Cardinal said as the gentlemen rose and Lord Cardinal quickly embraced his nephew. “It feels like ages since you’ve come to visit me.”

Lord Cardinal took to a chair as he gestured for the gentlemen to sit again. “My my, you two look exhausted. Pray tell, where did your journey from?” Lord Cardinal asked as he looked to his nephew.

“Uncle, we’ve just come from Portsmouth. You remember my good friend, Mr. Livingston, Lord Willcox’s son?” Fitz explained as he looked towards Gregory.

“Ah yes, Mr. Livingston. How is your family faring these days?” Lord Cardinal asked as he turned his focus on the young man.

“We are good as we can be, sir. Have you heard about the pirate attack on Portsmouth about a week ago?” Gregory replied, tears pricking his eyes as he prepared to tell his tale once more.

“My goodness, the news is all over London. Such a dreadful business, and all those poor souls who lost their lives trying to defend the port. And would you believe, just this morning I heard a rumor that a young girl has been kidnapped as well,” Lord Cardinal exclaimed with a shake of his head.

“Indeed, sir, a young girl has been missing. That would be my younger sister, Miss Maria Livingston,” Gregory confirmed. He watched as Lord Cardinal’s eyes grew large before the man leaned forward and patted Gregory’s hand in comfort.

“Your family must be suffering dreadfully so,” Lord Cardinal said softly, completely surprised by the news. Having no children of his own, Lord Cardinal could not fathom what Lord and Lady Willcox must be experiencing right now. He felt terribly sorry for them.

“Indeed, sir, my mother hasn’t been well since the attack,” Gregory said somberly as Lord Cardinal sat back in his chair and rested his hands in his lap, seeming to feel the same weight Gregory did.

“Uncle, we’ve ridden here from Portsmouth this morning in hopes of speaking to you about your good friend, the admiral. I remember meeting the man a few times here in London and was hoping you still had a good relationship with the man,” Fitz explained, pulling his uncle’s attention back to him.

“Of course. Admiral Reed and I are still very close. I invite him and his men to dine with me at least once a week when they are in Town. But you know how busy these men of the navy are. You never know when they’ll be in from the sea,” Lord Cardinal said as Fitz did his best to keep his patience with his uncle. Who could be a little flitty



sometimes.

“I’m so glad to hear that, Uncle. Do you know by chance if Admiral Reed is in Town? We are hoping to speak with him and see if we can rescue Maria from these pirates,” Fitz explained as he watched his uncle carefully. He felt he could even see the moment when the older man finally understood why he and Gregory had ridden all this way.

“My goodness, you’re right. I shall send my footman forthwith to Admiral Reed’s home and request his presence immediately. Just two nights ago did he dine here at the house with his officers. Surely he hasn’t gone back out to sea quite yet,” Lord Cardinal said as he stood and pulled the servant cord by the fireplace. A few moments later, Mr. Stevens appeared at the door.

“Yes, my lord?” he said as he came into the room.

“Please send Williams to Admiral Reed’s home requesting his immediate presence for a very pressing matter of the utmost importance,” Lord Cardinal explained. Mr. Stevens nodded his head and was quickly out of the room, calling for Williams in the hallway.

“There then. We shall wait for the admiral to arrive. Till then, shall we go on to the dining room? I’m sure dinner should be ready,” Lord Cardinal suggested, his mind now focusing on his next meal.

“Thank you, Uncle,” Fitz said as he rose with Gregory, quick to follow his uncle.

“Yes, thank you, Lord Cardinal. My family is indebted to you,”

Gregory spoke up as they walked down the marble floored hallway to the large dining room.

“No thanks is needed at this time, gentlemen. Let’s first see what the admiral can do for the cause,” Lord Cardinal said with a small smile on his face. “But wouldn’t it be grand if we could rescue the fair maiden from the pirates? What a tale that would be.”

Inwardly both Fitz and Gregory sighed heavily, knowing they were working with a very simple man.

## Chapter 11

The next morning when Horus banged on her shanty door, Maria was ready for him. “Wake up ye...” was all he was able to bark out before Maria quickly opened the door.

“Ready for the morning orders, Horus,” Maria said proudly, having taken the time to smooth out her clothes and fix her hair back into the kerchief she’d been using. Horus just looked dumbstruck, before he closed his mouth and tried to glare at her instead. It only caused Maria to smile more.

“Well, ye think yesterday was too easy for ya, huh? Well, I think you’d be suited well in the kitchen. Go help Marvin prepare the meals for the day!” Horus yelled before he stomped off, clearly not used to either people being this cheerful, or dealing with a woman in general.

Maria didn’t wait to be told twice. She shut the shanty door behind her and took off down the stairs to the main deck. She ignored the other pirates as she crossed the main deck, heading for the narrow stairs that led to the kitchen. She wasn’t looking forward to being kept below deck all day in a humid area, or working with Marvin who hadn’t said a single word to her yesterday when she’d helped Leonardo dish out all the rations. But she had to keep her spirits up in order to be prepared for any opportunity of escape that came her way.

In her mind, Maria felt that one day she’d be free from this ship. Eventually they’d have to stop in a port for new supplies. Even if the ship traveled to the other side of the world, she would discover a moment in which she could escape and make her way back home. Till then, she simply needed to keep her chin up and ignore the cruel men

around her.

“Marvin! Ready to create delicious food!” Maria called as she came down the stairs and moved into the kitchen, a small space that was opened on both sides to allow those who were passing out rations to come and go. There was only one small metal stove that had to be kept with only a little burning wood inside to prevent the ship from catching fire. A porthole was above the room, allowing the smoke to leave the space, but never allowing fresh air to come in.

“Why ye so cheerful this mornin?” Marvin asked. Maria placed her hands on her hips as she looked at the older man. He reminded her of a pig with more hair on his face and exposed chest than on his head. His belly was large, and to make matters worse, he was rather short.

“Because if I wasn’t cheerful, I’d die of despair,” Maria replied as she stepped into the kitchen and looked into the pot boiling over the stove. “Gruel again, Mr. Marvin?”

Marvin grunted as he turned his back to Maria and began chopping potatoes. “A lady such as yerself must be used to all sorts of luxuries, like cooks making French food every meal of the day,” Marvin said with a loud laugh. “But here, missy, we only have so many ingredients. Potatoes, flour, and water from the sea.”

“And what about these vegetables?” Maria asked as she started looking through the kitchen, examining different crates and barrels. She was surprised when she found a barrel of oranges. “And there is fruit here, too!”

Marvin laughed again as he continued chopping away, the sound displeasing to her ears. “The vegetables are for the Captain and his

chosen few. The oranges are the crew's currency upon the ship. There's only so many they get per voyage and today is not the day," Marvin explained, finding the young girl's naivetés quite humorous.

"And what about all these delicious smelling spices?" Maria asked as she sniffed at the bundles hanging from the rafters over the crates. They smelled heavenly and Maria couldn't wait to try them.

Marvin just shrugged his shoulders as he looked over at Maria. "The men are always happy with what I give them. Why change that now?" Marvin said as he went back to his work.

"You see, Marvin, I don't believe that's completely the truth. They eat because they're hungry. But what if we used these spices to help with the taste of the gruel? Surely they would be happier with that," Maria suggested as she took down a bundle from the rafter and opened it a little, taking a deep breath.

"And what would a lady such as yourself know anything about cooking?" Marvin said, turning on her with his knife drawn. Maria simply narrowed her eyes at Marvin, not willing to give into her fear of being trapped with the man all day.

"I've been trained from a young age what it takes to run a successful household. And that always included preparing meals for large parties. I may not have spent much time in the kitchen, but I do understand flavor," Maria said, straightening her posture as she approached Marvin. "And this dried parsley would enhance that pot of gruel immensely."

Marvin just growled at her as he went back to chopping the potatoes. Satisfied, Maria took a handful of parsley and tossed it into the pot

before she took the potatoes and added them to the dish. Maria did her best to look at this experience with cooking as an experiment. She couldn't wait to discover how food tasted with different spice combinations. At least she had something to take her mind off the full day's work ahead of her.

~\*~

Maria was finishing up dishing out the last portions of salted meat stew when the exhaustion of the day finally hit her. Though the stew was practically the same thing as the gruel, minus the flour, she felt that it was a little bit of an improvement with the spices she'd added in when Marvin wasn't looking. She'd spent the day cooking, scrubbing pots, bowls and cups, and arguing with Marvin over the food. But she tried her best to keep a smile on her face as she wiped her sweaty hands on her trousers, ready to make her way finally back onto the top deck and across to her small room.

"Good job, green thumb!" Marvin called to her as he finished putting away the last of the dried dishes. Maria just gave the man a small wave as she climbed the stairs and stepped onto the main deck.

The wind whipped by her and Maria took a deep breath of fresh air, holding it in her lungs a few moments before letting it go. Her skin was sticky with sweat, and as she walked over to the gunwale and looked down at the water below, she wished there was a way she could swim in the water to rid her skin of the grime that had settled there. She knew that she smelled rank, too. But as she gazed into the beautiful water below, she noticed a small boat tied to the side of the ship. Her eyes widened as she looked over the boat, following the cords of rope that bound it trailing up to the main deck and fastened to a post a few feet away from her. But as she looked at the cords of rope that could possibly lead to her escape, she realised that there was a lock around them, preventing anyone from stealing the skiff, unless they had a key.

Maria sighed then as she left the side of the gunwale and headed towards her room, keeping her eyes to the planks of the deck in hopes of avoiding the pirates and the fact that these men didn't wear shirts when working. It was a startling fact that she'd forced herself to get over yesterday when she'd helped Leonardo deliver the rations for every meal. She hadn't even dared to look up at James when she approached him for the afternoon meal, worried that she wouldn't be able to take her eyes off him again.

Now she just walked as quickly as she could towards the wheelhouse despite the cruel things she heard being said about her. Maria didn't take their words to heart, knowing that they were just mean pirates who didn't have much to live for. In a way, she pitied them knowing that at one point they'd been small children who were raised into the men they were today. And as she thought of them like that, she wasn't able to feel hurt by their words.

Reaching her small room, Maria shut the door firmly behind her and let her mask of strength fall. She crumbled to her plush blanket and pillow, pulling them to her face as she nestled into them, inhaling their spicy aroma that brought her much comfort. She laid there for a long time, sending up several prayers before exhaustion completely took over and sent her into a dreamless sleep.

~\*~

Lord Crawford sat in his uncle's study one night after dinner. He was feeling pleased with himself, knowing that Admiral Reed was doing all he could to ready a ship to go after Maria. He could envision her returning, feeling overjoyed that he'd set in motion her rescue. She would practically fall into his arms, full of devotion, and readily accept his proposal of marriage. He could even imagine what it would feel like to kiss her luscious lips, something he'd daydreamed about many times before when dining with Lord and Lady Willcox.

“I wish to speak to you privately, nephew,” Lord Cardinal spoke up, blowing out of a puff of smoke from his pipe.

“Certainly, Uncle. What is it that you wish to speak to me about?” Fitz asked, focusing his attention on his only living relative.

“While you and Mr. Livingston were visiting with Admiral Reed and the rest of his officers down at the navy office, I had a Mr. Green come pay me a visit,” Lord Cardinal said, causing Fitz’s eyes to grow wide and his skin to shiver. He tried to compose himself, but his uncle had always been a keen observer despite how he acted around guests.

“I see you already know why Mr. Green would come to pay me a visit, a day after you arrived in Town. It’s no wonder that you’ve been spending your time in Portsmouth, trying to win the heart of an Earl’s daughter,” Lord Cardinal said as he began to laugh, shaking his head at his poor nephew.

“They have no idea...” Fitz began to say but was quickly cut off by his uncle.

“Of course, they don’t, my boy. If they knew, you wouldn’t be welcomed in their home anymore. In fact, I’m just surprised they don’t already know,” Lord Cardinal said as he took a long drink from his evening port.

“I suspect that Mr. Livingston does,” Fitz confessed, turning his head away from his uncle, unable to meet the man’s gaze.



Lord Cardinal nodded his head as he regarded his nephew. "I'm sure he's at least heard a rumor or two. All I can say, Fitz, is that you'd better find a way to rescue this daughter of an Earl and save yourself from total financial ruin. I will not be aiding you in this matter," Lord Cardinal warned as he pointed a finger at Fitz.

"Of course, Uncle. I appreciate your discretion in the matter," Fitz said as he rose from the chair and bid his uncle goodnight.

Once he shut the study door behind him Fitz made his way towards the stairwell, looking for the solitude of the room he'd been given by his uncle. It was kind of him to open his home to both him and Gregory, and after their meeting with the admiral and his officers, he was confident they'd be able to locate Maria after some time. But now that he knew that his uncle was aware of his grim past, Lord Crawford knew that marrying Maria was his only way to regain his status in society.

## Chapter 12

The pirates had enjoyed Maria's food so much that the next morning when Horus came to collect her, he assigned her the same task for the day. And though Maria wasn't particularly fond of Marvin, at least she discovered a way to work with the man. Instead of telling him what to do, like she would a cook in her own home, she started asking him what he thought about various changes in the dishes he was already used to making. In this manner had she been able to almost enjoy her day working in the humid kitchen.

As Maria took the steps in the evening to the main deck, she was looking forward to once again being able to rest her head and get as much sleep as she could till the next day. But as she spotted Horus walking over to her in the dim light of the setting sun, she had a sinking suspicion that her duties weren't over for the day.

"Enjoyed yourself, did ya?" Horus asked as he gestured towards the kitchen below. "I bet making tastier gruel must be fun for you." Horus sneered at her as he pointed to a small group of men standing port side. "You'll be joining them for the evening as you keep watch on deck. There will be other men to relieve you towards midnight," Horus explained as he narrowed his eyes at Maria. "Have fun."

Maria glared at Horus as he walked away from her, whistling as he did so as though he was pleased with himself. She didn't know why this man was finding pleasure in her exhaustion, but she figured that pirates had very little to find pleasure in while sailing the seas. Taking a deep breath, Maria made her way to the other pirates who were standing together with orders to watch over the ship as night set in. Maria simply stood near them, not wanting to associate with them, but neither wanting to be punished for not following orders.

So instead she focused her gaze out to sea as a few lanterns were lit across the deck, shedding some light to be able to see by. She watched the waves crash against the ship and felt the wind pass her by as it got caught up in the sails, pulling the Emerald along the water. She felt the sway of the ship, a sensation that seemed to no longer bother her, and as she took deep breaths of the fresh, salty air, she could almost relax enough to sleep.

A few paces away down the gunwale of the port side of the ship, she noticed another pirate come to stand and keep watch. She glanced at him for a moment, curious to see if she knew him yet, and was surprised to see that the man was James. She quickly became awake again, pulling her eyes back to the water incase he'd suspect her of watching him instead of keeping watch for other ships sailing this way. But every once in a while, she'd sneak a glance at him, almost making a game out of it so she could both stay awake and perhaps catch him looking at her, too.

There was one time that Maria glanced over and indeed caught James looking at her. But he just wasn't looking. He was watching her, studying her with eyes that weren't filled with lust or hate like most pirates she encountered, but with curiosity. She quickly looked away, a blush creeping onto her face as she heard him chuckle, a low rumble against the blowing breeze. It frustrated her that he would watch her so when it was his fault that she was on this wretched ship and not with her family. It was that thought that caused anger to boil up inside her.

The one thing Maria wasn't expecting to hear on a pirate's ship was music. She turned, wide-eyed, towards the sound of a guitar being played, having only heard such a thing once before when she met a young lady at the orphanage teaching another child how to play the simple instrument. Maria saw a pirate sitting with his back against the gunwale strumming the four-course stringed instrument, his voice low just like the sounds he was creating with fingers that moved expertly over the strings. As Maria listened, she didn't understand the language

the pirate was singing in, despite her rigorous education, but could tell that the song was melancholy in nature. She felt the weight of the song in her heart as she watched the man play for several minutes.

Maria glanced at James, who was looking at her again. He gestured towards the guitar player as others started to gather around. At first Maria hesitated, wondering if she would get in trouble for not standing watch, but when James neared her again and whispered for her to follow him, she felt confident that if one of the Captain's trusted men were inviting her, then she could trust him.

And so Maria followed James closer to the sound of the guitar, and together with the others standing watch that night, they stood and listened to the music. When the man finished his song, he was encouraged to continue, and soon he started playing a more cheerful tune, a smile crossing his face. A few of the pirates clapped along as others swayed to the music. Maria couldn't help but smile as she looked around, never imagining that pirates would be so moved by music, or that any of them would know how to play an instrument.

"Do you like music?" James asked her as he moved closer to her so he could speak softly without the others hearing them.

"I love music," Maria replied. "I'm proficient at the pianoforte and often play for the orphanage in Portsmouth. When we lived in London, I used to sing at dinner parties my mother would host for her friends."

James smiled as he watched the joy that seemed to fill Maria's face as she recalled those happy memories. "I heard Jenkins speaking of your singing voice. Perhaps you'd like to sing for us now," James offered, knowing that Miguel, the guitarist, would not mind singing with a beautiful young lady.

“Perhaps another time,” Maria reasoned, not wanting to bring any attention to herself. “And you? Do you enjoy music?”

“I enjoy things that make the men happy. So, in a way, I do,” James explained.

Maria regarded him for a moment before she spoke her next words. “You’re very focused on your work,” Maria said, wondering if there was anything more to James than being a pirate.

James chuckled at her observation of him and simply shrugged his shoulders. “This ‘work’, as you say, is my life. I was born a pirate, I was raised a pirate, I was trained to manage a ship, and one day I’ll be Captain,” James said in a causal manner. To him, it was whatever pirate aspired to be. But to Maria, it sounded like a form of slavery. She simply couldn’t understand what James meant.

“Surely you’d want to live a decent life instead of all of this,” Maria said, gesturing to the ship and the sea.

James did his best to contain his mirth as he regarded Maria. She was a young lady of a completely different world than his own. Though she might consider pirates to be ruthless and degrading, to him these men were his family. And being a pirate was just a way of life. “I have never known another life that would tempt me away from the sea. I couldn’t imagine living in a house, ordering servants around all day, and spending my idle hours playing the piano,” James said, loving the way Maria’s face tightened in anger.

“And I can’t imagine why anyone would want to be filthy every day,

smelling of sweat and working till their skin burns from the sun,” Maria said, trying to keep her voice low even though her anger was getting the better of her. To calm herself, Maria crossed her arms over her chest and focused on the song of the guitar player, and the crashing of the waves on the hull sounding below.

“Please, *kalos*, let us not argue. We are simply too different to understand each other’s wants in life,” James said, taking his water skin from his side and handing it to Maria. She took it and sniffed the contents, surprised when she recognized wine. She hesitated before taking a drink, never having enjoyed wine in the presence of men. Here and there she’d enjoyed a bit at dinner and in the drawing room afterwards with the women attending the ball or a dinner party, but never had she solely drank wine amongst men.

Maria looked into James’ eyes as she brought the water skin to her lips, enchanted by his dark green globes that seemed to draw her into their depths. She knew that she wasn’t standing in the drawing room listening to someone play music while she talked with different gentlemen. No, her life was now upon this ship until she could find a way to escape. And since she didn’t know when, or if, she’d ever return to England, she decided that she’d live her life the way she wanted to. At least here on this ship there were no members of the Ton watching her, waiting to spread gossip about her actions or shame her for drinking wine amongst the men. She was the only one who could ever speak of what she’d done in the future, and that thought alone gave her a new sense of freedom.

Taking a large drink from the water skin, Maria enjoyed the fruity taste of the wine as it slid down her throat. She drank greedily at first, enjoying the taste after having had only stale water and greasy food to eat for days. James laughed as he took the water skin from her, afraid that she’d drink the whole thing if given the chance.

“I wasn’t expecting you to do that,” James said as he placed the cork back in the water skin.

“It seems that most men don’t expect me to do much,” Maria said with a smile, enjoying the feeling of the wine and how it helped her relax. As she watched the guitar player start another song, she felt for the first time since being kidnapped that she could relax. She wasn’t afraid of being killed, tortured, or of what the pirates had planned for her. Her heart wasn’t filled with fear or pounding in her chest with great anxiety. Her muscles actually felt relaxed instead of tense or exhausted. Just for this moment, she could enjoy the music and simply be herself.

James gestured for her to sit with him, and she did, crossing her legs as she rested her elbows on her knees, resting her head in her hands. James simply watched her as she enjoyed the music, thinking that even though she’d transformed these last two weeks, she was still truly beautiful.

“I would have never guessed that you’d be the adventitious type, Maria. A young lady from England, from a higher-class family, no doubt, who is now sitting crossed legged on a ship full of pirates, wearing men’s trousers. I can only imagine how ashamed your mother would be,” James said with a wink, a rumble of laughter in his chest. Maria couldn’t help but laugh along with him, knowing that if anyone of the Ton could see her now, they’d be utterly shocked.

“Who are you to judge me? You are a pirate, after all. A man who sails the seas, living as though he’s a free spirit, a life rid of prejudice and stereotypes. Certainly you could not judge my behavior any more than I could judge you. I’m simply human, making the best out of a grim situation. And since I am no longer in England anymore, I dare say that I don’t have to act like an English lady,” Maria said, rambling a bit as the wine took full effect. James nodded along with her words, laughter escaping him, causing Maria to laugh alongside him. It had been a long time since she’d laughed so and couldn’t deny that she’d missed it.

“Then if this is not what an English lady is supposed to act like, someone who is as fierce and determined such as yourself, do tell me what your life was like back in England,” James said, his voice becoming soft again as their gazes locked.

“You mean before you kidnapped me,” Maria said before she could stop herself. James’ face stiffened, and Maria could clearly notice the pain her words caused him.

“Yes, Maria. Tell me more about what a wealthy person in England does so that perhaps I might be less biased towards them,” James said, a small smile on his lips as he tried to move past the reality of their situation. Just for this night, he wanted to enjoy Maria’s company and forget that he was a pirate and she was his captive.

“Well then, since it will be for your better education and opinion,” Maria said, deciding to let go of her anger for a time. James smiled genuinely then as Maria started detailing her life. She talked about her brother, Gregory, and what fun it had been to grow up with an older brother who always took her on long walks when her family resided in the country. Then, when Maria was of age, they moved to London so Maria could start attending the Season. She excitedly talked about all the balls and parties she attended with her best friend, Charlotte. Then Maria gave details of what it was like to attend Charlotte’s wedding before her family moved to Portsmouth while the Season in London was finished.

“So, why didn’t a young lady such as yourself, from a prestigious family with lots of money, not win over the heart of such a gentleman that Charlotte was able to capture?” James asked, passing the water skin to Maria as she took another swig, passing it back to James who did the same.



“It is probably because most men don’t appreciate what I have to say. You see, an English gentleman wants a beauty for a wife, but one that keeps her good opinion to herself. I have the tendency to speak my mind on certain matters, which includes the fact that my father employs slaves to tend to his plantations,” Maria explained, causing James to chuckle.

“I can definitely see that strong nature in you, *kalos*,” James said as he nodded his head in agreement. “There is a lot of money to be made with slavery and I can see why a wealthy man like your father would employ the cheap labor of slaves in the West Indies,” James agreed, not being able to fault her father for that.

“But I don’t understand why anyone would steal people from their families and sell them to a slave master, to work till they are exhausted, with no hope of ever seeing their family again,” Maria said, becoming choked up on her words since she was now a slave. Though Captain Maidus had granted her some freedoms on the ship, he hadn’t granted her the freedom to return home.

“I was once a slave,” James said, his voice soft again as he looked away from Maria. She looked at him with wide-eyes, immensely curious about what he could possibly mean.

“It took a while for me to discover the details of my birth. From as long as I could remember, I was always told that my mother’s name was Tanya Ihram. My earliest memories are of being on a ship, around pirates and men, the sounds of screaming and cries filling my dreams,” James said, turning his head a little towards her so she could hear him clearly.

“There came a time when I was placed within an orphanage in Tripoli, and by always remembering my mother’s name, I eventually came to

learn of her family. I was welcomed into her childhood home by her sister, who shared with me all the details of my mother and father.

“Tanya had fallen in love with an English lord and left secretly with him one night, only telling her sister where she was going and asking for her to keep her secret. My mother’s sister explained that their father was a very brutal man and that she saw this as her only way to escape. So, she left Tripoli behind. It was some years later that news reached my mother’s family that the navy ship she’d left on had been attacked and those onboard sold into slavery. It was also learned that my mother had died onboard the ship before the attack, and there was nothing concerning the English lord she’d fled with,” James explained. He took a deep breath, trying to clear those distance memories away because he knew that the past couldn’t haunt him any longer.

“So, my mother’s sister finished raising me, and when I was old enough, I joined a pirate captain as a ship hand, eventually meeting Captain Maidus and becoming a true pirate,” James finished, shrugging his shoulders as though to say that his tragic past was of no immense importance to him.

Maria sat in silence for a few minutes as she thought over his words. It was terribly sad to think that James had grown up amongst pirates, without a mother or father, and as she thought about the men she’d encountered since she’d been kidnapped, she couldn’t imagine any of them raising a baby.

“So, you’re part British?” Maria said, finding the fact a bit ironic.

“According to my mother’s sister, it could be a strong possibility. All I have is one woman’s story. But my past is not important to me. Just my future,” James added.

Maria's brows furrowed as she considered James' words for a moment. "So, even after learning that your parents were possibly killed by pirates, you still wanted to become one? How can you kidnap people and sell them as slaves when you consider your own past? People are not merchandise," Maria said, becoming frustrated with James that he could do such a thing.

James narrowed his eyes at Maria, not appreciating her judgement of him. "And yet you freely enjoyed the money of your father, who takes advantage of slavery and benefits from the work that I do. If it wasn't for pirates kidnapping and selling them into slavery, your father would have no slaves to buy and force to work his plantations. My dear, you are a hypocrite if you can judge me for my life's work when you've lived a life of luxury because of it," James said sternly, leaning close to her as his anger built. But the closer he came to her, the more he began to think about how he'd much rather enjoy kissing her than spitting words at her.

His eyes drifted to her lips, and though Maria was furious with this man for accusing her of being a hypocrite when she'd had countless arguments with her father over the same matter, she couldn't deny how warm her cheeks were getting as James leaned close to her. When his eyes drifted to her lips, she parted them, surprised that he would go from being angry with her to perhaps considering stealing a kiss from her.

"My father has told me often that I'm an idealist, and that sometimes I think too much for a woman of my age. He even told me I should be more vigilant about finding a future husband than filling my head with such nonsense such as slavery and freedom. But what I find most terrifying is that marriage is no more than a woman being a slave to her husband if that woman doesn't marry for true love," Maria said, pulling away from James as she stood and quickly left the group of pirates enjoying an evening of guitar music.

Maria walked away from the music and towards the gunwale on the other side of the ship. It was quieter there and she could breathe easily as the night wind whipped around her, allowing her skin to feel cool after the warmth she'd felt sitting next to James. She couldn't believe the things she'd said, or the story James had told her of his past, but she knew for certain that she'd never understand why James willingly lived the life of a pirate. As Maria stared up into the starry night, thinking about her conversation with James and reflecting on how he made her feel, she couldn't deny that she was filled with great anger. She hated him for kidnapping her, for arguing with her when he too was a slave. But she also couldn't deny that there was something more that made her heart beat a little faster every time she noticed his eyes on her.

As Maria kept watch over the ship that night, she tried hard to make sense of everything she was feeling. That was, until her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden, hollow wham!

## Chapter 13

Maria had never experienced such a sensation in her life so it took much longer for her eyes, ears, and mind to comprehend what was happening. It was first the feeling that her feet were no longer resting on the wooden deck, as though she was floating in the air. Next came the bitter cold of complete darkness, the touch of water and wet surrounding her as she was pulled down by some invisible force. *What is happening to me*, Maria thought as she tried to search with her hands and eyes for a way out of the darkness.

Back on deck, shock rippled through the crew as they searched for the object that the ship had collided with. Horus was quick to appear from below deck, shouting orders as the entire crew was woken from the collision, spilling onto the deck like ants ready for action. “Lower the sails! Gather in groups and check for damage to the hull! Light the lanterns! Let down the skiffs!” Horus shouted as he made his way through the crowd, lanterns and torches being lit as he walked, men assembling themselves and taking quick action. They prayed for the best, that whatever damage there was could be repaired, and yet they prepared for the worst.

Before the ship had made contact, sending a shockwave through the hull, James had been watching Maria standing by the gunwale. Part of him felt foolish for sharing his past with the lady when she appeared to never be able to understand why his life was the way it would always be. The other side of him wanted to follow her to that side of the ship where he’d slide his arms around her and pull her into a deep kiss. But the moment the collusion happened, he’d whipped his head around in case the ship was being attacked, and when he looked back to see where Maria was, she was gone.

Instead of running to help the other pirates along the port side of the

ship, James ran to the starboard side and peered down into the dark water, fearing Maria had fallen in. He didn't hesitate this time as he shouted to those around him, "I'm jumping into the water!"

James dove from the gunwale, piercing the water with precision. Those who had heard him had stopped to watch, only then moving to the gunwale to peer over and see who James was trying to rescue. Those who had rope had already tossed their ends into the water, hoping that whomever James was going after would be brought back up to the surface quickly. With it being the dark of night, they didn't think James would be successful, and a few even thought that James would probably lose his own life doing such a reckless thing.

When James broke the surface again, tugging another body with him, a cheer rose up from the deck, causing others to gather and see what all the commotion was. James had pulled Maria from the depths of the water, surprised that she was still alive as she coughed and took deep breaths of air, her golden hair wet and clinging to her face.

Maria couldn't believe what had just happened. One minute she'd been on the deck, the next in complete darkness that didn't allow her to breathe. When she felt strong arms pulling around her she didn't fight them, knowing that death was surely pulling her away from life. But as the darkness moved away, showing light shining from the ship above as lanterns and torches were pointed towards the water, Maria coughed up the water in her lungs and replaced it with fresh air. Her eyes moved around her, trying to piece together how she'd ended up in the water, but they then settled on James as he seemed to quickly examine her before securing the ropes to them, allowing the pirates to pull them up to safety.

"You're a real hero, James!" one pirate said as they were pulled on deck. James gave them a weak smile.

“A blanket, gents. Who can bring me a blanket?” James asked, and another pirate moving quickly to retrieve one from a room below. A few pirates congratulated James as the crowd dispersed, quick to continue their search for any damage done to the hull.

James stood with his arms around Maria, holding her body close to his as she shivered from the shock of almost drowning. She hadn't said a word, but he could tell at least she was still breathing as she stood with her arms squeezing her chest, her eyes darting around as water dripped from her soaked clothes and hair. Already her clothes had been fitting but now they clung to her form, giving anyone who looked a pretty good idea of what she'd look like without them on. James stood in front of her then, shielding her from the view of prying eyes.

“Are you okay?” James asked as he tilted her head towards his, their eyes locking. James saw fear in them and felt a great desire to rid her of any fears she would ever have. It was a strange sensation, but he never looked away.

“I don't know, to be honest,” Maria said softly. “I know I'm alive, but I can't stop this feeling that I can't breathe even as I take deep breaths of air.”

James wanted to kiss her, but as the pirate who had run off to fetch him a blanket returned, he thanked the man and quickly wrapped it around Maria. Though he too was soaked from the dive into the dark water, he felt comfortable enough and was only concerned about Maria.

“How about you sit for a while and wait to dry off a bit? Just keep taking deep breaths and I'll be back for you,” James said as he helped Maria to the wooden deck, tucking the blanket around her until only her head showed through. She had a far-off expression on her face,

one he recognized as shock. He'd seen it many times when green pirates were caught in battle for the first time. When James heard the voice of Captain Maidus in the distance, he knew he needed to leave Maria. With one last look, he turned and headed to the other side of the ship to hear what had happened.

~\*~

The shudder of the ship making impact had immediately startled the Captain awake. At first he'd hoped that perhaps he'd been dreaming, that a sudden wave had crashed against the ship, waking him up with a start. But when he heard Horus barking orders, and the sound of every able man coming onto the deck, he knew that something terrible had happened. Jumping from his bed, Captain Maidus quickly pulled on his trousers and pulled a shirt over his head, not bothering to tuck it in as he pulled on his boots. Then he quickly pulled open his door and stepped onto the busy deck.

Ignoring his men, Captain Maidus took the stairs up the wheelhouse where he stood next to the ship's wheel, where Horus stood looking over the deck below. The Captain gazed all around, trying to locate an attacking ship.

"What is happening?" Captain Maidus asked as he continued to scan the horizon.

"The ship has collided with something, sir. There are no other ships out at this time and the men are in the skiffs, getting a better look," Horus replied as they leaned over the back of the ship, trying to see anything in the water below. When a cheer broke out at the front of the ship, the two men moved towards the sound, their eyes on the starboard side of the ship.



“What on earth is going on?” the Captain demanded to know as he descended the stairs once more to the main deck, grabbing a pirate he’d seen from the crowd who had been gathered on the front of the ship. The pirate was startled by his Captain’s outburst and stared into his eyes with fear.

“What is all the cheering about?” Captain Maidus asked.

The pirate stuttered as he explained, “James jumped into the water to rescue someone who’d fallen into the water when the ship hit the reef. He just pulled up the young lady.”

Captain Maidus put on a smile as he released the pirate, smoothing down his shirt where he’d grabbed him by the collar. The pirate seemed mollified as he stepped away from his Captain and continued helping those around him. Captain Maidus then turned his eyes towards James and watched as he held the young lady to his body. Even from where he was standing, he could make out the shapely figure of the woman in her soaking clothes, making him wonder if he should keep her for himself. As Horus appeared by his side, Captain Maidus turned his attention to his second in command.

“We’re in a reef, sir, and currently doing our best to get the ship out before it causes any more damage. There’s damage to the hull on both starboard and port sides to the front of the ship, but she’s not taking on water. We’ll have to do repairs before we can raise the sails again, but it can be managed till we make it to the port and gather the supplies we’ll need to make a permanent fix,” Horus quickly explained as the crew started to gather around them, waiting for their next orders.

Captain Maidus eyed them all, placing a smile on his face to show them that they needn’t worry. They looked tired and exhausted but

were ready to act the moment the Captain spoke. It was the type of power Captain Maidus craved and skillfully wielded, making him one of the most successful pirate captains currently sailing the seven seas.

“My good men, it appears we’ve only nicked a small reef. We’ll have to push the ship clear of the reef and begin making a few repairs so we can reach the next port safely. Then, we’ll do what we do best...” Captain Maidus paused as a wave of laughter ran through the crowd, “and we’ll get the supplies needed to sail safely home.” Cheering erupted over the deck as the Captain smiled proudly at them all.

“And a special congratulations to James for his heroic rescue of a damsel in distress,” Captain Maidus added, laughter erupting around them as they turned to see James at the back of the crowd, still drenched from his daring dive into the dark waters below.

James clenched his fists, not pleased to be made of mockery of, as the crowd dispersed with Horus beginning to shout the next round of orders. It appeared that none of them would be getting any sleep that night. But before James could move to assist in getting the ship free of the reef, he noticed that Captain Maidus was walking towards him, so he stood still, waiting to see what the Captain would say to him next.

“That was quite a feat of courage, my boy,” Captain Maidus said as he clapped James on the back. Then the Captain leaned close and whispered into his ear, “I never knew you were capable of risking your life for a piece of merchandise.”

James smirked, trying to appear as though he thought the Captain’s words were funny. As the Captain straightened again and looked into James’ eyes, he was surprised by the mirth he saw in them. “I guess I didn’t want to let my Captain down,” James replied with a shrug of his shoulders, as though what he’d done was no major accomplishment. But the Captain knew that the crew members would

regard James as a hero, a title that was only fit for a captain.

“Of course, James, of course,” the Captain replied as he turned from the man and made his way to his private quarters, satisfied his men could take care of the work. But he began to wonder if he needed to keep his eye on James and Miss Maria as they continued to journey south.

## Chapter 14

Maria sat on the deck, swaying to the movement of the ship as waves crashed against it, simply staring in front of her without truly seeing anything happening in front of her. All she really saw was the blackness of the ocean mixed with the feeling of not being able to breathe. The trance around her wasn't broken until she recognized James' face in front of hers.

"We need to get you somewhere safe and off this deck," James said as he put his arms around her, pulling Maria to her feet. She wondered where on the ship she could possibly be safe but was suddenly shocked when he scooped down and gathered her in his arms like a small child, still wrapped up in the blanket.

"What do you think you are doing?" Maria demanded, unsure of what she should do. Screaming wouldn't do any good because no one would come to her rescue. She also couldn't deny that she enjoyed the feeling of being in his arms.

"I'm carrying you to my private quarters. You'll be safe there and you'll be able to rest for a few days. You need to sleep and regain your strength," James explained, grateful that everyone on board was currently occupied with their own tasks so that they didn't pay James any attention or look to see that he was carrying a young lady to his quarters.

Maria didn't say any more as James led her to a set of stairs below the deck that she hadn't used before. It led below the wheelhouse and the Captain's quarters, below her little room which seemed so high above. It was dark below deck as every able light was being used to see into

the night in order to rescue the ship. But James was used to the darkness of being below deck and found his room easily enough.

When James opened the door and carried Maria inside she was surprised by the cleanliness of the room as a lantern hung from the rafter, casting light into the room. A narrow bed rested against the wall, and the very sight of a bed filled Maria with want. She noticed a small wardrobe beside it and a chest at the end of the bed. She sighed when James sat her upon the bed and began to pull the blanket away. When Maria refused to let it go, James chuckled.

“I don’t want my bed soaking wet. You’ll need to give me the blanket and get changed,” James explained, causing Maria to blush. She scooted from the bed and stood as she handed James the damp blanket, which he tossed onto the chest. He then turned to his wardrobe and opened it, revealing a plethora of different clothing.

“Have a look in here and see if you can find anything that will suit you,” James instructed, standing aside to let Maria by, but since the space was rather small Maria brushed by him, the contact sending a shiver of pleasure over her body.

James held his breath in his lungs as he moved a little bit further away from Maria as he looked through his clothes. He fought the urge to help her undress and have his way with her right now in his room. But he didn’t want to startle her or cause her any more fear than what she’d already experienced. Not only had he kidnapped her, taking her away from everything she knew and found comfort in, but now she’d almost drowned. Had he not felt something special towards this young lady, she’d be dead right now.

“I think these will do,” Maria said as she laid out the clothes on the bed and turned towards him.

“Good. I’ll leave you to change and rest,” James said as he turned to leave the room, but Maria grabbed his hand, pulling him back towards her.

James looked down into her green eyes as they seemed to pierce his heart. She continued to hold his hand, the warmth of it seeming to fill her with a desire she’d never experienced before.

“Thank you for saving me,” Maria said, her eyes locked with his as a blush came over her as she thought about how she’d like to thank him for pulling her from the dark water below. And before she could think too much about those details, James was lowering his head to hers.

Maria had never before been kissed on the lips. As James pressed his lips to hers, she closed her eyes and relished in the sensation. She placed her hands on his chest as he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer to him as he parted her lips with his tongue. Maria allowed him to devour her as he drank from her lips. She moved her hands towards the waistline of his trousers, pulling up the hem of his shirt until she could reach her hands underneath, finally being able to touch his tanned skin as she’d wanted to for weeks.

James let out a growl as he felt her hands on his bare chest. She explored his torso with her hands, causing his ardor to rise quickly. He snaked his hands in her golden hair, holding her head as he continued to kiss her passionately. He knew that if he didn’t end things soon he wouldn’t be able to refrain from taking her completely when she’d already shown him how willing she was to be devoured by his kisses.

James kissed her soundly once more before taking a step back, lowering his hands to hers as he pulled them from his chest and simply held her hands, staring into her eyes as they both caught their

breath. He smiled at her, trying to bring her reassurance so that he wouldn't scare her anymore.

"I appreciate your gratitude," James finally said, letting her hands fall back to her sides. "I must go now, but I'll return in the morning with some food and water. Rest now, *kalos*."

Maria simply nodded her head, shocked by the feelings that coursed through her. She watched him go, watched the door shut in front of her, and listened to the sounds of his footsteps going back down the hallway. She stood there for several moments, her mind going over the most splendid kiss that she would have never been able to imagine herself.

A smile came to her lips as she turned and began to undress, setting aside her wet clothes and boots on the chest. She looked forward to being in dry clothes again but wondered if she would become too warm because she was already burning hot from the passionate kiss. She pulled on a pair of trousers that she had to roll at the bottom, and though the muslin shirt was rather large, she could at least button it at the top.

Maria lowered the lamp light overhead before climbing into James' bed. She pulled the pillow close to her, inhaling deeply James' scent as she thought again and again how wonderful it felt to be in James' arms, to feel his warm skin under her hands, and to taste his kiss upon her lips. Though she was afraid to fall asleep, to be pulled back into the darkness of her mind, she at least felt safe knowing that this small room was James' and that he'd return for her. Surely a man who kissed her so fervently would never cause her any harm.

When the next morning came, Captain Maidus sat eating oranges at his desk, reviewing his sailing maps as he tried to understand how they'd sailed into a reef. He made details on all his newest maps, hoping to avoid the same occurrence in the future. It was in this manner that Horus came into his quarters.

"I've come to deliver the morning report," Horus said, stopping in front of his desk. The Captain gestured for him to continue as he kept his eyes on his maps. "The crew has been divided into two squads, sir. One is working on moving the ship safely out of the reef while the other is resting. Then they'll switch till the ship is out of the reef. It is expected to take a few days for the repairs to be made."

"Good. And what about the girl?" Captain Maidus asked, looking up at Horus.

"The girl, sir?" Horus wondered, his brows furrowing.

"Yes, Horus. Miss Maria. What is her condition? Something must have happened to her after James pulled her from the sea," the Captain said, irritated at having to explain his question.

"Ah, yes. James is seeing to her recovery. He explained that she suffered much shock over the experience and now she's resting in his quarters," Horus explained, mildly fearful about the way his Captain would react.

Captain Maidus reined in his temper as he glared at Horus. "And no one has said a word about this? How are the men taking to the idea of a young woman in James' quarters?" the Captain asked, having a difficult time understanding how there wasn't a current commotion



amongst the crew members since he never allowed them to enjoy women upon the ship.

“Everyone trusts James, sir. He’s the most reliable pirate we have on board, and perhaps one of the most loyal. This crew knows that James always puts the needs of his Captain first,” Horus explained honestly. Though he too was loyal to Captain Maidus, he also wouldn’t have risked his own life to save a slave even if it meant a high profit for his Captain. It went to show what type of loyal pirate James really was.

Captain Maidus leaned heavily back in his chair as he placed his fingers together in front of him and thought about the situation. He was truly grateful to James for both kidnapping the young lady and then rescuing her when she fell overboard because he was working hard on arranging a buyer for her. He had a few clients in mind already but wouldn’t be able to make a handsome profit until they reached Tripoli. In the meantime, he needed Maria alive, but also pure. Could he trust James to not take advantage of the young lady he was taking care of?

As Captain Maidus dismissed Horus with a flick of his hand, he knew he needed to tread lightly. He wouldn’t be able to accuse James of deflowering Maria without solid proof. The morale of his crew was important to him, and since he knew how well-respected James was amongst the men, he couldn’t make a hasty decision until he knew more. A wrong move could lead to **groveling** amongst the men, or worse, mutiny. Captain Maidus knew that James possessed all the skills necessary to lead his own ship one day, but he wasn’t willing to let the man take his position either.

Deciding to let the matter go for the time being, Captain Maidus turned his focus back on his maps, sinking his mouth into a freshly peeled orange.

James walked with heavy footsteps down the stairs, being careful not to drop the contents of the cup or the bowl of food as he made his way towards his room. Though he had no intentions of resting there after a full night's work, he wanted to make sure Maria had gotten some rest and perhaps could eat a bit of food as well.

James reached his room and pushed the door open, peering inside the dimly light room to see Maria resting soundly on the bed. His coming into the room hadn't woken her, so he moved quietly, setting the water and bowl on the floor next to the bed.

He moved to leave the room again, not wanting to disturb her, but he couldn't help looking over his shoulder at her as she slept. Her golden hair was sprawled out over the pillow, her hands resting above her head. The clothes she'd changed into were too large for her small frame, but he could still make out the rise and fall of her chest. He thought for a moment about how he'd like to lock his door and climb on top of her, straddling her legs as he kissed her awake. He wanted to feel her bare skin against his, and...

James forced himself to look away as he moved quietly out of the door and shut it carefully behind him. Perhaps it was the weeks at sea that caused him to yearn for the comforts of a woman. He couldn't deny that Maria was beautiful and could easily tempt any man, but he felt something stronger pulling him towards her. He often thought about her, how brave she was to endure everything she'd been through, and even have the bravery to stand up to pirates. There was more to Maria than just beauty. It was truly her fierce nature that called to him.

As James made his way back onto the top deck so he could make it to the other set of stairs that led to the bunk rooms, he wondered if what

he was feeling for Maria was just more than lust and admiration. Could Maria ever mean more to him than just merchandise for his Captain?

## Chapter 15

Maria recognized a familiar sound as her mind pulled away from the nightmares she'd been plagued with all night. She knew it was the sound of a bird, and as she sat up in James' bed, she realised that it was a gull. She listened to its call for a few minutes, realising that the sway of the ship wasn't as rough as it normally was. Maria leaned over the side of the bed and picked up her stockings, thankfully now dry, and then her boots, which were still wet. Deciding to simply wear the stockings for now to cover her feet, Maria stood and walked slowly to the porthole, not wanting to get a splinter from the wooden planks.

Maria peeked outside the hole, seeing that the ship wasn't moving at all besides the light sways caused by the waves crashing against the hull. She saw pirates in the skiffs moving around the front of the ship while they passed materials and tools to the men repairing the damage. It appeared that the ship wouldn't be moving again until the damage was repaired. As she watched them work, she wondered how close to shore they were if the ship had collided with something in the shallows. It made her wonder if she would be able to escape.

As Maria looked around the room, wondering if there was anything else there that she could use to escape, she noticed a small cup and bowl resting on the floor at the side of the bed. She knelt down and picked them up, wondering when someone had come by to place them there, and if that someone had been James. She quickly drank the water and started to tear apart the two oranges that had been placed in the bowl. They tasted sweet and juicy in her mouth, and though she'd enjoyed oranges before, she felt like she'd never tasted ones so sweet.

Setting the cup and bowl aside, Maria sat on the edge of the bed, a feeling of fatigue washing over her even though she'd been asleep for

many hours. She tried to fight the feeling, but it came over her again, encouraging her to lay her down once again on the pillow that smelled so familiarly of James. She placed a hand to her head as she closed her eyes, fright filling her as she realised she was quite warm. As she took several deep breaths, sleep taking hold of her, she prayed she wasn't coming down with a fever.

~\*~

James felt like it had been only a few minutes since his eyes had fallen shut when he heard the call for his squad to assemble and begin work on the hull. James grumbled to himself as he rolled out of his bunk, his body sore from the stiff bed that wasn't more than a few planks of wood and light padding. He already missed his bed back in his room, but at least he could rest assured that Maria was safer there than she was working alongside the other men on this particular job. As James shuffled to his feet and followed the others out of the bunk room, he cast his eyes round about as they moved to the top deck.

The sun was set in the sky at a position that James read to be about three o'clock in the afternoon. It confirmed his suspicion that indeed he'd had plenty of time to sleep, but the rest he'd gotten wasn't the kind he needed. He looked forward to the time when his shift would cease, and he could sleep again during the dark hours.

"I haven't seen ye this exhausted in a long time, my boy," Leonardo said cheerfully as he walked up to James with his afternoon ration. He would have to eat quickly as his squad was already making it to the skiffs which would lower them into the sea and allow them to commence their work.

"It's been a while since we've had to work through the night to save the ship. It's not like Captain Maidus to steer the ship into a reef," James reasoned as he took the salted meat Leonardo handed him and

quickly ate, washing it down with a swig from his water skin.

“I’ve been thinking the same thing me self,” Leonardo agreed as he shook his head.

“Makes me wonder how many others are thinking the same thing,” James said softly as he looked around at his fellow pirates. “We wouldn’t want a mutiny on our hands. Not this far out at sea, anyways.”

Leonardo nodded his head in agreement as he continued to pass out the rations to the men that were walking by. “For now, just keep your head low till this hull gets repaired. From there it will be to the nearest port to get fresh supplies,” Leonardo said softly, averting his eyes as he spoke. James understood Leonardo well enough to know that he wanted James to keep quiet about all of this. So, without saying another word, he followed his fellow pirates to the next empty skiff and climbed in as it was lowered to the sea. For now, he’d simply focus on the task in front of him.

~\*~

Maria’s mind was foggy when she heard the door open. She opened her eyes, the action requiring more effort than she thought it should need. Her vision took a minute to clear, and once it did, she found herself looking into Leonardo’s eyes.

“I’ve come to bring ye something to eat, miss. My, you don’t look so well,” Leonardo said as he knelt down and felt Maria’s forehead with the back of his hand. He whistled then as he passed her a cup of water as Maria sat up on the bed. “Seems ye’ve come down with a fever. No wonder when you fell into the sea and was there for a long time.

Food, water, and rest, and you'll be right as rain in no time."

Maria sighed, her fears becoming reality. "Thank you, Leonardo, for the food and water," Maria said as she took small bites of the salted meat.

"Tis just me duty, Miss Maria. You know well enough now what they have an old man like me doing on a ship like this," Leonardo said with a wink.

Maria simply offered him a kind smile as she listened to the sounds outside the porthole. "I saw earlier that the ship wasn't moving," Maria spoke up, hoping to learn more of what was happening around her.

"Aye, the ship took a bit of a hit when it skidded across the reef below. We're free of the reef now but have to repair the hull before she can sail again. We'll have to stop at the nearest port in order to finish the repairs," Leonardo explained as he took the empty cup from Maria, along with her morning dishes.

"Do you think Captain Maidus will allow me on shore?" Maria asked, watching Leonardo carefully though her head pounded from the pain of the fever.

Leonardo shrugged as he considered the young lady. "He might have deemed ye one of the crew, miss, but you have to prove your loyalty to the Captain. And that will come with much time," Leonardo said honestly.

Maria sighed, knowing that escaping this ship could be harder than she had thought. “Well, thank you for the conversation, Leonardo, but I know you’re a busy man,” Maria said, trying to give him a kind smile. If she could win his trust, then perhaps she could have some more leeway with the other pirates since Leonardo was an experienced pirate.

“Indeed, miss, there is always more to do. Take care and rest a bit. Let that fever come and go on its way,” Leonardo said with another wink before he left, closing the door behind him.

Maria lay back down on the bed, her eyes facing the closed door. She knew that if she wanted to, she could leave this room, sneak down the hallway, and perhaps off the ship while everyone on board was focused on repairs. But without knowing where the closest shore was, she doubted she could swim to safety or get an entire skiff to herself to make the journey. No, she would have to continue waiting for the best opportunity to escape. And right now, she needed this fever to break and leave so she could regain her strength.

Maria closed her eyes and began to think of ways to escape once the ship docked at the next port. No matter where in the world they were, she knew that getting away from the ship would allow her to seek help with local officials. Her knowledge of the modern languages would aid her in seeking assistance back to England, or at least posting a letter to her father. But the more Maria thought of escaping, the more she wondered if she could ever truly forget James.

~\*~

James had felt the heat of the day pressing against him as he worked with the crew to make the necessary repairs. The wind was very little, causing the sun to feel hotter than normal. And with being in the skiff for the rest of the day, the sun seemed to reflect off the sea’s surface,



almost blinding him.

By the time he made it back aboard the Emerald, his water skin was empty. He made quick work of refilling it from one of the barrels of water stored near the ship's kitchen. Then, not feeling very hungry, he made his way to his room as the darkness of night settled in.

He didn't bother knocking as he opened the door to his room and stepped in. Shutting the door behind him, he watched as Maria sat up on the bed and gave him a weak smile. He was surprised to find her still resting, and as he studied her features closely, he noticed sweat on her brow.

"You have a fever," James said as he moved to the bed and placed the back of his hand on her forehead. She laughed lightly as she moved away from his touch. She made room for him to join her on the bed, allowing him to sit beside her.

"It will pass after a little while. But for now, it has left me rather weak," Maria admitted as she watched James. He looked tanned from the sun as he wore nothing but trousers, his chest bare, and from where she sat next to him, she could almost feel the sun's heat radiating from him. She reasoned that perhaps the fever was starting to scramble her thoughts, yet she liked the view that James presented her of his toned body.

When Maria started to giggle, James knew that the fever was making her delusional. Yet there was something about her laugh that made him join in with her. For the first time since they'd spoken last, James felt he could relax and simply enjoy being around this young lady he'd plucked from the English shores.

They sat in mutual silence for a while, simply regarding each other. Maria thought that James seemed different with her now, more open and kinder. She had watched him being tough and dedicated around the other pirates, and especially in front of Captain Maidus, but with her she felt that James was showing her a gentler side of himself. She deemed it rather ironic considering this was the man she was supposed to loathe with every fiber of her body because he was her kidnapper. But as she gazed into his eyes, she knew that she felt something entirely different with this man.

“Here, let me help you feel more comfortable,” James said, an idea coming to his mind. He moved from the bed and to the chest on the floor, lifting it and withdrawing another water skin that contained a bit of brandy. He handed it to Maria after uncorking it. “It will help with the pain of the fever.”

Maria had never tasted brandy before and was surprised by the way it burned as she drank it. She gasped when she was done, handing it back to James as she wiped her mouth on the back of her shirt sleeve. It was a very unladylike thing to do, but she’d stopped worrying about being ladylike the moment she’d been brought on the ship.

James chuckled as he watched her, seeing the reaction on her face as the liquor burned going down. “It has a bit of a bite, but I promise you that it will help,” James said as he then found a strip of fresh linen from the chest and a small bucket.

Maria watched as James loosened the cord around his waist and began to tie it onto the small bucket. A memory flashed in her mind of when he’d taken that cord and bound her, but she pushed it aside as she watched him lower the bucket into the water below, pulling it back up once it was full. Then, with the bucket of water now in the room, he lowered the clean cloth into it and motioned for Maria to lie down.

She obeyed, leaning her head back on the pillow, and James came to sit beside her, lowering the cloth to her forehead. The cloth felt cool, causing a soft moan to escape her lips. "That feels wonderful," she admitted, closing her eyes and enjoying the sensation of the cloth cooling her head. After a while, James would dunk the cloth in the sea water again, wringing it out once more before he replaced it to her forehead.

James could feel his ardor rising as he watched the relief the cool cloth gave Maria. Never before had he tended to anyone sick save himself, and he remembered what it was like to catch a fever at sea. He became brave, moving the cloth from her forehead, dipping it in the water again, and then placing it on one cheek, then the other. Moving on, he placed it under her chin and down her neck.

Maria kept her eyes closed as she lifted her chin, allowing James to cool her feverish skin. When James started to undo the button at the top of her shirt, she stilled and focused on her breathing. She wondered if she should stop him, but when she felt the cool cloth on the top of her chest, she threw caution to the wind as she enjoyed the relief it brought her, a deep sigh coming from her lips as her chest rose and fell.

James wondered if he should undo another button to gain more access to her feverish skin, but decided that he needed to remain in control of his ardor as he moved the cloth from the bucket, and this time to her arms, rolling up her sleeves to apply the cool water there. And afterwards, he replaced the cloth to her forehead, letting it rest there as he removed his hand, knowing that if he remained close to her, he'd take full advantage of her weak state.

When Maria felt James move from the bed, she opened her eyes and watched him near the door, his tanned back facing her. She wondered if she'd done something wrong, so she called out to him. "Thank you, James. I feel much better now," she said, causing him to stop and look

over his shoulder at her. He didn't say anything, didn't need to say anything, because Maria could see the lust in his eyes as clearly as the rising sun over the watery horizon. He simply gave her a smile and nodded once before he opened the door and closed it behind him as he left.

Maria took deep breaths as she realised that James could have easily given into his lust. She'd no doubt encouraged him, allowing him to unbutton her shirt and apply the cool cloth to her chest. The relief she now felt from her fever was wonderful and she'd enjoyed feeling his hand on her exposed skin. And even so, he'd left her. Maria knew that James must really respect her if he wasn't going to give into the lust that was clearly in his eyes. It made her think about whether or not James could really care for her as a man would a certain woman in his life.

## Chapter 16

The morning came as a relief for Maria as she was able to rise without feeling the heaviness of the fever or the pain of the headache it had caused her. Though what it did leave her with was aches all over her body. Her body was still exhausted, but she took the time to stand and pace the small room, knowing that exercise would be important in keeping her body strong.

Sometimes she'd stand by the porthole, watching men come and go along the front of the ship as repairs continued to be made. The sound of their work filled the air, shouts of commands being let out from time to time. But she'd always listen for the seagulls in hopes that the ship was close to land, close to a place to where she could escape to.

Filled with idle time, Maria thought again and again about her plan to escape once the ship docked at the next port to finish repairs. She'd looked through James' wardrobe, looking for things to disguise her so she could slip onto shore. She'd even taken time to look through the chest on the floor, finding trinkets that she became more curious about than she was about finding something to aid her in her escape. It had felt like hours that she'd sat tracing her fingers over an ivory elephant, wondering what its story was and how James had acquired it. But after a while, exhaustion would always claim her, calling her back to bed.

The most exciting parts of her days were when James came to bring her food and water. She found herself looking forward to seeing him throughout the day, enjoying their conversation more than the few pieces of nourishment he'd been able to collect for her. The food seemed worse since she'd stopped being assigned to the kitchen, but she knew she wouldn't last an hour in the humid room until she had her strength back. She also didn't like the idea of being trapped below

deck for any extended amount of time. Maria still slept with the lantern burning above her, not able to rest in darkness anymore.

“You seem to be doing better today,” James commented a week after the ship had rammed into the hidden reef. He found that the most enjoyable parts of his day weren’t falling asleep on deck after a hard day’s work, but the time he spent speaking with Maria, getting to know her more and learning about her life in England. He enjoyed most hearing about the balls she’d attended, the gossip she shared with him and the details of the gentlemen that had repulsed her. In turn, he’d try to liken it to his life, of women he’d come across at gatherings that made him turn his nose in the other direction.

“I think I am starting to feel like my old self again,” Maria agreed, even though she knew that she’d never feel like herself again. As long as she was on this pirate ship, she’d never be able to reclaim anything of her past. The more time she’d spent in his room, the more she longed for home and prayed for an opportunity to escape.

“I’m sure Horus will have duties for you before long,” James mentioned, knowing he couldn’t keep her in his room forever.

“And I’m sure you’re wanting your bed back,” Maria said with a smile, having enjoyed the small luxury while traveling out at sea. “For a pirate, you have a nice room.”

“That is because I’ve worked hard to own these small pleasures,” James said, looking into Maria’s eyes, his thoughts wandering as they so often did when he was near her, with her behind closed doors. He’d refrained from kissing her again, knowing that his control around her was always hard to maintain.

“I do have a small confession to make,” Maria said, her cheeks turning pink as her eyes drifted to the floor.

James couldn't help but smile at the shy way in which she appeared, reminding him once again just how innocent she really was. “And what is that, *kalos*?” he asked, lightly touching her chin and tilting her head towards his.

“I looked through your things,” Maria confessed, her eyes filled with worry as she watched James' face carefully for his reaction, afraid he'd become awfully angry. She wasn't prepared for him to drop his hand from her face and double over in laughter. It was such a rich sound, his laughter, and it lasted for several moments, causing Maria to giggle as she watched him.

“My dear, I am a pirate upon a ship full of pirates. I don't keep things of value with my while I'm sailing. There is nothing here but things I need for my travels, and whatever I have collected along the way that I wish to bring home with me again,” James explained once his mirth had subsided and he'd righted himself again. “So, what did you discover then?”

Maria still felt slightly embarrassed as she said, “I found an ivory elephant. I've never seen ivory before, though I've heard of it many times. So, I did gaze upon it for some time, but made sure to put everything back in the place in which I did find it.”

James nodded his head, thinking of the small trinket he'd collected. “It was a gift from my nephew. It is his way of reminding me that eventually I need to come home and help take care of the family,” James explained, his thoughts then returning to home.

“You have a sister?” Maria asked, surprised that James had never spoken of his family since the first time while they’d listened to Miguel play the guitar; the night she’d fallen into the sea.

“Not by blood. I live in a small tribe in Tripoli. So, in a matter of speaking, I have many kin. Many brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles. Countless nieces and nephews,” James said with a chuckle. “I do love to play with the children. And there is one particular boy, Harold, who I’ve taken a certain liking to. He I call my nephew, and I dote on him so.”

Maria smiled at the thought of James playing with children. Though she’d seen the stern side of James when he was working alongside the other pirates, or when he was talking with Horus or Captain Maidus, she had felt a kinder side to him during their many talks together. It was in this manner that she was able to see that James would be the type of father who would dote on his children.

Maria looked away from him as her cheeks blushed a deep crimson as she thought of James as a father. She’d never considered a man for his ability to interact with children or even discussed with a gentleman before about the prospects of having children or how many the man would want. These were all rather intimate details that one only discussed with their intended, or perhaps not even until they were married.

“What has you so flustered?” James asked, noticing the way her cheeks burned. It made her appear even more attractive, and James couldn’t help but think about how else he’d like to turn her cheeks pink.

“I was simply thinking how odd it would be to see you playing with children because you are a pirate,” Maria said, trying to tell a half-truth so that her words would be a little more believable.



James chuckled as he shrugged his shoulders. "This may have been the life I was born into, but that doesn't mean I'm a heartless monster," James said as he considered her. Surely such a thing would not have caused her to feel so embarrassed, but he didn't want to pressure her into speaking to him. He enjoyed the way she spoke to him freely and how she seemed to be comfortable in his presence, even though the door was shut and they were often alone together.

Maria didn't respond to that comment because she knew that there was a side to James from where he could show kindness and compassion, even humor. But that didn't rid her mind of the fact that James was still the man who'd kidnapped her and who hadn't allowed her a means to escape. She knew, deep down inside, that she could never trust the man – despite what her heart often told her about him.

"Well then, I must be back on deck before I am noticed missing. I'm sorry I couldn't bring you more, but I'll be back tonight," James said, standing from the bed.

"Yes, of course. And thank you, James. I appreciate it nonetheless," Maria said as she moved back on the bed till her back was touching the hull.

James gave her a small smile before he left the room and pulled the door behind him. Though he loathed leaving her, and to not have been able to bring more food, he knew he needed to keep up appearances if he was going to pacify the other crew members. Many were talking about the fact that soon the ship would be sailing for the next port. With that being the case, James needed to start focusing more on the next mission, and less on the beautiful young lady in his sleeping quarters.

Maria sat up from where she'd been laying on the bed, daydreaming of James, when she heard footsteps approaching the door. With night having set in, she'd assumed it was James, but when the door opened to reveal Captain Maidus, her heart started to thump in her chest as the man came into the room and quickly closed the door behind him.

"Good evening, Miss Maria," Captain Maidus said with a bow. She dipped her head as she sat with her back against the hull, afraid as to why the Captain had come to address her instead of summoning her to his quarters. "I wanted to personally come to see if you are comfortable enough. How are you feeling?"

Maria raised her chin, trying to put on her best appearance of strength despite the weakness she felt in her body from almost drowning. "My fever has broken, and I regain my strength each day. I'm quite comfortable and feel safe here," Maria replied, hoping this would be a short visit.

But Captain Maidus simply smiled and nodded his head, his eyes gazing around the small room before they settled on her again, his dark blue eyes causing her chest to tighten in fear. Though the Captain was rather handsome, there was something about his eyes that made Maria worry. She knew this man had power if he had been able to attack an English port and get away successfully.

"And what of my fine ship, Miss Maria? How do you like the ship and living the pirate's life?" he asked then, stepping forward, making Maria wish she could take another step back. But her back was to the hull and she had nowhere to go.

“It’s all very fine enough,” Maria said in short, not wanting to insult the Captain and bring his anger upon her. She couldn’t honestly say she enjoyed being on the ship or that she liked the idea of being a pirate. Every day she still thought of a way to escape and never considered giving up and becoming a real pirate.

“Well, my dear,” Captain Maidus said as he closed the distance between them, coming to stand by the bed as he leaned over her. “Let me remind you that you are not really a member of my crew. Surely you couldn’t believe that a woman could be a pirate. No, this was only a temporary means to keep you out of harm’s way. You see, there are many on board who’d like to harm you, have their way with you, because it’s been so very long since any of us have been home.”

Maria’s heart was pounding in her chest as his dark blue eyes stared at her, his words causing fear to course through her body. She prayed for escape, knowing there was nowhere she could run. There would be no one who could save her now.

“It is only I who keep such men from harming you, Miss Maria. I keep their hands off of you and allow you to remain in comfort while repairs are being made on my fine ship. Therefore, you should be thanking me and showing me a bit of reciprocity for this great favor I’ve extended to you,” Captain Maidus said, his hands coming on either side of her body as he leaned over the bed.

“There are other men aboard who would protect me, as they would protect any crew member. Therefore, I owe nothing to anyone,” Maria spoke, causing the Captain to pause in his pursuits of claiming her lips with his. He considered her words as he straightened himself, looking down at her with much curiosity. He thought for a moment, and then wondered how close she and James may have become this past week while she’d been sleeping in his quarters. But Horus had reassured him that James slept on deck every night.

“Let me impart on you some facts to clear that little mind of yours,” the Captain said, a sneer crossing his lips. “James is a pirate and will always be a pirate. He knows how valuable you are. A young lady with fair skin and golden hair will fetch a high price at the slave markets, which is a very common practice in Tripoli. Every pirate knows that the most fortune to be made is in kidnapping beautiful ladies and selling them at market. The only reason James keeps you in his room is to ensure that you stay healthy, beautiful, and pure.”

Maria simply glared at the Captain, her piercing green eyes burrowing into his. She dared not look away or appear affected by his words. She couldn't allow him to muddle her mind with words or cause her any more fear than she'd already experienced. She simply knew that she couldn't possibly trust a single thing the Captain said to her.

“You should know, Miss Maria, that it was James' idea to sell you at the slave markets once we return home. But since I didn't want you to be treated like a slave or be overcome by lusty men, like Jenkins, I made them think that you were a member of the crew now to save your purity,” Captain Maidus said as he approached her again. “You see, I once lived amongst the aristocrats of your society.”

Maria was shocked by this news, eyeing the Captain warily. “I can hardly see you amongst the Ton,” Maria said, though she had seen in him a level of refinement when compared to the others aboard. He had certainly been able to bow properly and address her in kind.

“That is one thing I learned quickly about living amongst the Ton in London. You could always trust what they said. You could trust that a particular little bit of gossip was true, that certain elite gentlemen were actually poor, having succumbed to gaming halls and gentlemen's clubs, and that new debutantes had experience between the sheets,” Captain Maidus said, pausing for a moment to laugh at her. “But you can never believe what a pirate tells you, no matter how

convincing their words might be.”

Captain Maidus sat on the edge of the bed as Maria regarded the man, trying to imagine him at balls or dinner parties, shocking young ladies with his words and charming them into doing unthinkable things. It was probably him that stole gentlemen’s money and robbed young ladies of their purity.

“And sir, how do you expect me to believe a word you’ve said when you are in fact a pirate?” Maria said, trying not to smile at the cunning of her words.

“That, my dear, is where you have me wrong. I am not a pirate, but a Captain of a pirate ship. No, I am much worse than a pirate and the one you should be most worried about,” Captain Maidus said in a low voice that sent terror through her as he leaned forward to kiss her.

His pursuits were interrupted as the door was swung open, to reveal James appearing with a cup of water and a plate of food. Captain Maidus stood quickly, his face relaxing into a smile as he turned his eyes towards James.

“And the boy is still taking care of you, I see,” Captain Maidus said as James stepped into the room, his eyes moving between his Captain and Maria. He could tell that she was frightened, but he didn’t dare question his Captain in front of her.

“Yes, sir. I’ve come to bring Maria her evening rations before retiring on deck, Captain,” James said quickly. He handed Maria the cup and plate of food that she immediately started eating, happy to have something to do but be forced upon by the Captain.

“Very good, James. I simply wanted to make sure that every member of my crew was faring well, and since Miss Maria had taken a fall into the water, I wanted to ensure her health,” Captain Maidus said proudly, moving towards the open door.

He then turned his attention on Maria, his eyes narrowing on hers. “And I appreciate the pleasant conversation, Miss Maria. I shall be sure to continue our talk soon,” the Captain said before he gave James a swift nod and left the room, the sound of his footsteps sounding down the hallway until they couldn’t hear them any longer. Only then did James shut the door and turn towards Maria.

Maria finished her food quickly and drained the water, handing the utensils back to James. He held them in his hands, looking down at Maria as she simply looked away from him, her chest rising and falling quickly with her quick breaths.

“Are you okay, Maria?” James asked softly, worried about what the Captain might have said to Maria to cause such fear inside of her. He also wondered why the Captain had been so close to her on the bed.

“I’m as well as a slave can be,” Maria replied, unwilling to look at him.

His brows furrowed as he regarded her. Surely the Captain had just reassured her that he considered her one of their crew now, so he wondered why Maria would speak of herself as a slave.

Not wanting to pressure her to talk to him as she continued to look away, James placed the cup and plate in his tunic and headed towards

the door again, deflated that he wouldn't be able to enjoy another pleasant conversation with the young lady that was quickly winning over his heart.

"Goodnight, Maria," James said over his shoulder before walking out of the room and closing the door.

When James had told her goodnight, she finally looked towards him, tears in her eyes as he shut the door. She contained her sobs until she was sure he was back on deck, only letting her tears fall then. Maria buried her face in the pillow, wishing she could wrap her arms around James and allow him to hold her as she cried. But she couldn't deny that there had to be some truth in the Captain's words. Why else would James take such great care of her if he didn't have some sort of motive behind his actions? He was a pirate who showed no intention of ever changing his ways.

How many people had James kidnapped, Maria wondered as her sobs started to subside. Exhaustion was quickly coming over her and she didn't have much energy left after she'd been scared to death by the Captain and left wondering if she should have trusted James with so many details of her life. Would he use these details against her when he took her to the slave market to sell? Maria was consumed by grief and fear as she was pulled into a deep sleep by her fatigue.

## Chapter 17

The next morning, James quickly rose, hoping to have an extra moment to speak privately with Leonardo over his concerned thoughts. He'd spent half the night thinking of Maria, trying to decide how he truly felt about her. And if he did have strong emotions for her, what was he going to do about it?

James found Leonardo down in the kitchen, preparing to run the crew members their morning meal. Without saying a word, James motioned towards Leonardo, beckoning him down a small hallway that was used to hang the salted pork that made up the majority of the pirates' meals.

"What is it, me boy?" Leonardo asked, noticing the familiar concerned look in James' eyes. It had been a common expression when James had first started out as a real pirate instead of just a ship hand.

"I want to discuss something of great importance to me, Leonardo. As my only true friend, I need you to keep my confession a secret, and to impart on me some sort of wisdom," James said with pleading eyes, making Leonardo worried about what James was about to tell him, but he simply nodded anyways, always being proud of the fact that he was someone his fellow crew members could rely on.

"I've fallen for Maria, and I cannot deny it any longer," James started with, almost feeling lighter for admitting it aloud. "But I fear showing my feelings to her when I don't believe the Captain when he says that she's a part of the crew now. Never has Captain Maidus hired a maiden, and there has never been a lady pirate, only ship wenches."



Leonardo nodded his head in agreement, knowing that what James was saying was true. “Aye, me boy. I’ve had the same fears myself. First, that you would fall in love with the beautiful woman you’d kidnapped,” Leonardo said with a wink, “And also that Captain Maidus has no intention of keeping her on once we land in Tripoli.”

James sighed, conflicted over what actions he should take next. It was even harder knowing that Maria had been unwilling to speak with him last night. Did that mean she was going to refuse to speak to him ever again?

Seeing that James was at war with his thoughts, and having seen this same thing happen to other pirates in the past, Leonardo said, “James, you are not the first pirate to fall in love with a fair maiden that has been kidnapped. Some would release the maiden because of their love. Others would abandon ship together and try to start a new life of their own. True pirates would tear out their love, knowing that such pursuits are foolish. It is not hard to imagine that Captain Maidus has plans to sell the girl or ransom her for a high profit once we reach Tripoli. He just doesn’t want to share the profits with his crew, which is not unlikely for captains to do.”

James nodded his head that hung low in defeat, knowing that what Leonardo spoke was true. Deep down inside, James knew that he was a pirate through and through. That was why so many crew members respected James - because he always followed orders and put the wants and needs of his Captain before his own. It was foolish of him to consider falling in love with Maria, that they could actually have some sort of life together. But unless he was willing to escape with Maria, he saw no way they could live a life of love.

If James helped Maria escape, she’d want to return to her homeland, back to her family. And he had no reassurance that her family would be accepting of him. They would have to run away together and make

a life for themselves, but where could they go where Captain Maidus wouldn't find them? James would be considered a deserter and would be slain by any pirates that he crossed once the word got out. And what of his family back in Tripoli? Surely, they would be shunned for his desertion as well.

There was no way in which James contemplated the matter that would allow him and Maria to live happily together. Turning his eyes back to Leonardo, he gave the man a small smile. "Thank you, my old friend. You are very wise and always know what to say," James said, trying to regain his composure so he could focus on the mission at hand. Already the ship was sailing for the nearest port, and soon they'd have to don their disguises and prepare to gather their much-needed supplies without being recognized as pirates. Even in Spain they would be captured and hung for their crimes against Britain.

"Of course, me boy. I'm happy to have shown you the clear path forward," Leonardo said, though he felt for the young boy. He too had once been in love and had chosen the pirate's life instead, never allowing him to feel love for another woman again. The pain of leaving was simply too much.

"Would you take Maria her rations from now on?" James asked, knowing it was for his own good that he stayed as far away from Maria as possible. Leonardo simply nodded his head as they two of them moved away from the small nook. James made haste in returning to the top deck, wanting to focus solely on his work so that perhaps his mind could be bothered only with getting done what needed to be done, and not wondering about the what ifs of the future.

His hopes of losing himself in his work were destroyed when he spotted Maria on the starboard side of the ship, scrubbing the deck with a mop and bucket. He was shocked to see her on deck as he quickly approached her.

“Shouldn’t you be resting?” James said to her in a soft voice as he came to her side. He hoped to not draw the attention of anyone around them, but he was genuinely concerned for her health.

“I have my orders, sir, and wouldn’t want to disobey an order from the Captain,” Maria said, not taking her eyes off the deck as she plunged her mop into the bucket of sea water and began scrubbing at a section of algae that was forming between the deck and gunwale.

“But do you feel strong enough to be doing this work?” James asked, ready to lead her back to his room if he had to. He’d do her work before his if he had to pacify Horus into keeping his mouth shut over the matter.

Maria shrugged her shoulders as she continued to scrub. “I’m sure it doesn’t matter what I feel,” Maria said. “I have my orders.”

James was becoming frustrated with her, wishing she would just tell him what had her so upset and why she’d pulled away from him so. But as he remembered Leonardo’s words, he knew that it was for the better if this was how things were going to be between them from now on.

“The Captain must have made you see that clearly when he spoke to you last night,” James said before walking away from her. If she wasn’t going to speak to him openly like she had in the past, then there was no point pursuing her any longer. Perhaps that Captain had appealed to her more than him and that was why she was acting so coldly to him now. Was that the Captain’s plan? To win her over because he saw James as competition?

James shook his head as he took his orders from Horus and got to work helping the crew adjust the sails. The plan was to make it to a small port off the coast of Spain in order to purchase new materials to finish sealing the damaged hull. For now, James only focused on his work and didn't allow his mind to wander, even when he could still see Maria out of the corner of his eyes.

~\*~

When James had walked away from her, speaking his own opinion of what had been spoken between her and the Captain, she couldn't help but turn and watch him walk away. She was furious with him for putting her in this situation, and even more disappointed in herself for allowing her heart to be open to him. He was a pirate after all, and her only interest at this time should have been finding more ways to escape. With the ship sailing to port, her opportunity for escape could possibly be coming soon.

But as she watched James walk away, a strange pain came into her chest, causing her to raise her hand to her heart where the pain was. Maria tried to think rationally, knowing that she shouldn't be allowing herself to feel anything for James, that the only person she could ever trust was herself. But no matter what she told herself, she couldn't get the pain in her chest to subside.

~\*~

For the first time in almost three weeks, it rained. By the time Maria had finished scrubbing algae from the main deck, she'd been soaked through from the onslaught of the storm. Finding small refuge in the small room near the wheelhouse, not being able to bring herself to return to James' room, Maria sat with the plush blanket around her, shivering against the chill of the storm.

Maria jumped when she heard a single knock to the shanty door, thinking at first that perhaps the harrowing wind had thrown something against it. But when the sound came again, she stood and cracked open the door, seeing Horus' dark face on the other side.

"The Captain has requested your presence," Horus said with a sneer before turning and dashing down the stairs, no doubt in hopes of finding his own cover in the rain.

Maria shut the door again and gave a heavy sigh, wishing she could only fall into a deep slumber and hope that the storm would be through by morning. But not wanting to anger the man who held her captive, she tossed the blanket aside and stepped back into the storm, clutching onto the hull as she steadily walked down the stairs towards the Captain's door.

The thing that scared her most about the storm wasn't the sound of the wind, the clap of the thunder, or the fact that she was freezing from being completely soaked through. No, she was most terrified by the way the waves crashed onto the main deck, seeming to toss the ship into a tempest. And though she saw no terror in the eyes of the other pirates, she couldn't deny that it was clinging to her. She kept picturing herself being washed off deck and into the raging sea, sure to be swallowed up this time. As the storm continued to fall around her, she fervently prayed for the first time to stay rooted on the ship and out of the dark waters below.

Making it to the Captain's door, she knocked loudly on it with no time to spare on being ladylike. When she heard the Captain's voice, a muddled sound against the howling wind, she took it as a sign to enter, quickly opening the door and stepping into the room in order to shut the storm out.

“Ah, Miss Maria. Won’t you care to join me for dinner?” Captain Maidus said, rising from the head of the table and coming to greet her. She was surprised that no other pirates sat at the table, and as she looked quickly around the room, she realised they were alone. Her heart hammered against her chest as the Captain bowed to her. She didn’t bother with a curtsy. This wasn’t England, after all.

The Captain observed Maria for a moment as she stood up against the door, water dripping from her till a puddle began to form around her boots. He tilted his head a moment, as though thinking about something.

“If I remember correctly, I might actually have something you could wear for this evening,” the Captain said, moving to the opposite side of the room where several chests laid side by side. He opened one and beckoned Maria. She had little choice but to obey as she joined him, peering into the trunk. She was surprised to find all manner of dresses, especially in the Captain’s quarters.

“You never know when you might need something,” Captain Maidus said as he took a step back to allow Maria to start looking through the pile of women’s clothing. Maria found several cotton gowns, no doubt for those who had worked on the ship in the past, but when her hand fell on silk, she couldn’t help but pull the gown closer to her. She smiled to herself as she looked at the lavender gown, thinking how nice it would be to wear it to an actual dinner party instead of one with her capturer.

“You should try it on,” Captain Maidus’ voice sounded in her ear as he leaned closer to her. She immediately pushed it away as she grabbed a plain cotton gown with several layers to accompany it.

“I’d be happy with this,” Maria said, standing and showing the Captain what she’d gathered. He simply shrugged as he pointed to a curtain behind his desk. “You can change behind there. Don’t worry, I won’t peek.”

As the Captain winked at her, she did her best not to cringe before him. The man frightened her; knowing that he held power over everyone upon the ship, and more importantly, over what would happen to her in the future. She simply nodded her head in response as she quickly moved behind the curtain, pulling it all the way closed. She took a quick look around, seeing that this was where the Captain’s bed was.

Not wanting to keep the Captain waiting, or give him time to peek at her, Maria shed her wet clothes and boots, setting them aside before she pulled on a chemise. It almost felt warm against her skin, a heavenly feeling as she then tied on a shift, followed by a petticoat and the gown itself. It was a feeling of familiarity as she donned the clothing, feeling protected and a little more like a woman again as she finished pulling on a pair of stockings and a dry pair of boots. The boots were a little big, but at least she was covered completely again.

Stepping out from behind the curtain, Captain Maidus turned to greet her. He gave her a pleasant smile as he looked her over, and Maria felt a bit of relief when his eyes didn’t reflect lustful feelings.

“Even in a simple maid’s gown, you are still absolutely beautiful,” Captain Maidus said as he pulled out a chair at the table. Maria gave him a small smile as she allowed him to seat her, but she didn’t dare respond to his comment. She wasn’t about to lead the Captain on and give him a false impression of herself. But she also didn’t dare offend or anger him. So, Maria decided to do what she often did best when faced with a gentleman she wasn’t interested in. She would be polite, but aloof.

“So, tell me, Miss Maria. Whom did you know in London during this past Season?” the Captain asked, pouring her a glass of wine that Maria simply glanced at. When the Captain was finished giving her a healthy portion of wine, Maria simply took the glass cup and took a small sip, not wanting to appear rude.

“My best friend is Miss Charlotte O’Hare. Now, Lady Morgan,” Maria said, watching as the Captain cut into his Cornish hen. Maria turned her eyes towards her own plate, her mouth watering as she looked at her own Cornish hen, which appeared to be cooked to perfection. It was the first portion of meat she’d been allowed to eat that hadn’t been salted or boiled to complete nothingness. As she cut a bite and placed it carefully in her mouth, Maria fought hard against the urge to sigh in delight.

“Ah, I knew of Lord Morgan. I met him at a ball during last year’s Season. He seemed quite boring to me,” the Captain responded, before plopping a chunk of carrot into his mouth.

“I can’t imagine any host allowing a pirate into their ball,” Maria said, eyeing the Captain suspiciously.

Captain Maidus laughed before taking a long drink of his wine. “That is because the Ton did not realise I was a pirate. You see, pirates are masters of the art of disguise. I’ve even dressed as a woman to effectively pass by guards who might be on the lookout for a pirate Captain,” he explained. He laughed again when Maria looked at him with wide eyes, trying to picture the Captain in a gown. “It is true, I’m afraid.”

“So, who were you pretending to be when you met Lord Morgan?” Maria asked, turning her attention back to her dinner plate. If she was going to have to deal with being alone with the Captain, talking idly,



she was going to at least get a full belly in return.

“I introduced myself as Lord Andros. The name sounded foreign enough that it would explain the darkness of my tanned skin, and after acquiring some friends in very high places, I was able to acquire invitations to every ball and dinner party that I desired,” Captain Maidus said, watching Maria carefully. He was enjoying this little game of cat and mouse. He would lure her in with his tales, and perhaps later he’d dine on her luscious lips.

“And pray tell, Captain Maidus. How did a man like you gain friends who would have that sort of influence during a Season?” Maria asked next, trying to catch him in some sort of lie. She understood very well that dinner party and ball invitations weren’t handed out to the public like pamphlets. It was like being a part of a secret society where only true members got a lucky ticket to the ball.

“Gaming halls,” Captain Maidus said, completely surprising Maria. “I’m quite lucky at playing cards, and after I won very large fortunes from a few certain gentlemen of elite status, I then used that leverage to gain access to almost every part of the city. One man, an admiral, even forged privateer papers for me so I could lead my ship safely to English shores.”

Maria couldn’t help shaking her head at Captain Maidus as she continued eating. She thought how devious Captain Maidus was and how she couldn’t wait to flee this ship in order to be as far away from the man as possible. But if he was able to gain access to some of the most secure homes in London, would there ever be a place in the world where she’d be safe from the pirate Captain? For now, Maria pushed those thoughts away as she took another sip of her wine. First, she’d have to escape in order to worry about Captain Maidus ever finding her again.

"I can't help but be curious about the certain gentlemen you swindled. Care to share their names?" Maria asked next, always wanting to know a bit of gossip.

Captain Maidus smiled at her, a bit surprised by her question. He wouldn't have expected a lady to ask such a thing. He'd almost forgotten how indecisive young ladies of England could be. "Admiral Reed was the man in uniform I blackmailed. Lord Rogers was an older gentleman I convinced to let me take his young daughter to dinner. That was an enjoyable night." Maria crinkled her nose at him, thinking how terrible that particular bit sounded. "Lord Marcus simply paid me to go away, and Lord Crawford signed his entire fortune to me when I beat him again and again at the card tables."

Maria's eyes widened as she set down her fork and knife, locking eyes with the Captain. "Lord Crawford? Lord Fitzwilliam Crawford?" Maria asked, praying she'd heard the man wrong.

"Why yes, Miss Maria. Do you know Lord Crawford? I would have presumed by this past Season no one would know of the man considering the fact that he's now penniless," Captain Maidus said, loving the way the young lady reacted with shock and awe. He loved to cause surprised reactions in young ladies. There was something about the way their eyes grew large that always caused his ardor to rise.

"I'm quite familiar with the man, yes. He and my brother are rather close," Maria said, turning her eyes back to her plate. Did her brother know that Lord Crawford had lost everything at the gaming halls? Surely not, if he'd allowed the man anywhere near her.

"Well, I'm sure that won't last for much longer. No one wants to be friends with a poor Earl," Captain Maidus reasoned, finishing the last bits of vegetables from his plate.

Though Maria had thoroughly enjoyed the meal, she couldn't help thinking about Lord Crawford and if the Captain's words held any truth. Though the truth did not matter at this moment since she had no way to warn her family of such things, she couldn't help but wonder.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Captain Maidus asked, bringing Maria's attention back to him. She wiped her mouth on a napkin and set it upon her plate, almost forgetting she was on a ship instead of in a dining room. She felt the sway of the ship again and heard a crack of thunder overhead, reminding her of her present situation.

"The dinner was quite lovely, Captain. I had no idea Marvin could actually cook," Maria admitted. The Captain laughed at this, sliding away his own clean plate as he picked up his wine glass and drained the rest of the contents.

"I will say, Marvin's dishes have been quite flavorful lately. I hear that's thanks to you," Captain Maidus said, gesturing towards her with his glass before setting it aside.

Maria smiled as she thought about working with Marvin and getting to use the spices in his dishes. "I was simply experimenting when I was assigned to work with Marvin in the kitchen. I figured it couldn't make anything worse," Maria said with a chuckle.

"Indeed, Marvin isn't the best cook, but there are a few things he does well," Captain Maidus agreed.

Maria stood then, knowing that the meal had come to its completion and there could certainly be no more idle talk. She'd learned a good deal about Captain Maidus and his abilities to con others, and she wished to be back in her small room, even if that meant risking getting completely soaked again.

"You don't have to leave so soon, my dear. Surely, you'd want to finish your wine and enjoy decent company for the evening," Captain Maidus said as he watched Maria take another step back from the table. It irritated him that she hadn't waited to be dismissed. "I'm sure your evening company hasn't been this thrilling," he added, thinking of Maria having recovered from her fall in James' quarters. He still had a sneaky suspicion about the whole situation, despite Horus' reassurances.

"Indeed, Captain Maidus, I've enjoyed myself this evening and I'm quite grateful for the delicious meal and enlightening conversation. But I'm rather tired and wish to rest before Horus comes in the morning to order me about," Maria said with a small smile, trying to pacify the Captain.

Maria felt terror run up her spine as she watched the Captain rise from his chair, his eyes narrowing at her. He did not smile as he walked to the chest of women's clothing and pulled out a thick cloak. Then he came over to Maria and wrapped it around her shoulders, placing the hood soundly on her head before taking her chin and tilting up towards him.

"So be it," he said, lowering his head to hers and claiming her lips. His kiss was hungry, and Maria did her best to endure it, though she did not return his affection. She closed her eyes tightly, praying that this would be over soon. She couldn't help but compare the way the Captain kissed her to the way James had. She remembered the passion that James' kisses stirred within her, and in that moment she wished she was being kissed by James.

When the Captain felt nothing in return from Maria, he broke the kiss, leaning his head back to look into her eyes. What he saw was nothing, no passion or lust. That was how he was truly able to know with a surety that she was still an innocent.

“Goodnight, Miss Maria,” the Captain said as he turned from her.

Maria didn’t wait another minute as she turned and almost ran from the room, pulling the cloak close around her as she tried to shield herself from the rain. In the dim light of the setting sun, Maria did her best to quickly return to her small room, focusing mostly on staying aboard the ship than fleeing quickly from the Captain.

Once safely in her small room, she sat quickly on the floor and tossed the wet cloak aside and wrapped herself up once more in the blanket. After a few minutes she started to feel warm again and was at least happy that she now wore dry clothes. But as she sat there thinking, she prayed that the Captain wouldn’t kiss her like that again. It had been a vile experience she hoped to never repeat.

However, the more she thought about it, the more she wondered if she should try to charm the Captain. Perhaps she could convince him to let her go or at least not sell her as a slave once the ship docked in Tripoli? But no matter which way she thought about it, she knew that keeping her distance from the man was her best hope of escaping.

## Chapter 18

The following days thankfully brought clear weather as the Emerald sailed to the closest port off the coast of Spain. Maria quickly discovered that wearing a cotton gown wasn't as convenient as wearing trousers and a shirt when it came to following her orders during the day. After spending a day scrubbing the deck cannons, she felt weighed down by her many layers as the sun beat down on her. It had taken speaking to Louis again about having another pair of trousers and a small shirt to be able to work more comfortably to get some new clothes. A part of her knew that she could have spoken to James about the matter, but she was doing her best to avoid him, and he seemed to be doing the same thing in return.

Now wearing a fitting pair of trousers and a muslin shirt, she felt that she could breathe easier as she worked. Some days she was assigned to work with Marvin, and others she was assigned to scrubbing this or that. A few nights she'd be assigned to keep watch over the ship as the sun set. But no matter what task Horus gave her, she never complained, no matter how sore she became or how tired she felt from working under the sun.

In the evening, sometimes she'd undress in the privacy of her small room and allow the evening air to cool her skin. As she looked down at her arms and legs, she could tell that she was becoming tanned. A few weeks ago, she'd been absolutely upset at her tanned skin, knowing that gentlemen preferred a fair skinned lady. But now she found it interesting to see her skin transform in this manner, making her appear more similar to those she worked alongside with than a fair maiden captured from the shores of England. All in all, Maria did her best to keep up her spirits, especially since she knew that soon the ship would dock, and she'd possibly have her opportunity to escape.

One morning, Maria awoke to an unusual sound. She could hear people speaking all around her, as though every crew member was on deck. She rose slowly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she stood and stretched her arms above her head. Then she opened the door to her room and stepped out onto the deck of the wheelhouse, the sight before her stopping her in her tracks.

It had been so long since she'd seen any land that she was completely surprised to see buildings around her. The ship had docked in the night with other large ships anchored in the harbor. The sound of people speaking came from the small town on the other side of the docks. As Maria walked to the gunwale and peered out over the town, she could see a market on the seashore with what looked like dozens of people walking about.

As Maria's eyes followed the dock to the ship, several long planks had been let down from the ship to allow the pirates access to the docks. She watched as the pirate crew spilled onto the docks, dressed in English navy uniforms. Maria wondered if Captain Maidus had acquired the official uniforms from the admiral he'd beat at cards. But Maria didn't bother thinking about the matter for very long. Now was her chance to escape.

Maria stayed upon the wheelhouse deck, kneeling next to the gunwale as she watched the pirates spill onto the dock and make their way to the market. She waited until she felt that most had left the ship before she moved from her position and started down towards the main deck. She hoped that if most of the men were on shore, then she could sneak off the ship and blend in with those at the market.

She moved steadily, walking down the stairs and keeping her eyes open for any signs of pirates moving about. She knew she needed to remain unseen and quiet. Though her screams would have been heard by those in the market, she doubted anyone would come to her rescue upon an English ship. No, these Spaniards wouldn't dare start a skirmish upon an English vessel and would leave her to scream. So

Maria moved steadily to the ship's main deck, looking around for anyone left aboard.

Several pirates, dressed in navy uniforms, milled around the deck. They seemed to be talking and not assigned to any particular duties. Perhaps they'd been left behind to keep an eye on the ship while the others were away. They were standing close enough to one of the planks leading down to the dock that she knew she wouldn't be able to easily escape that way, so she instead walked towards the kitchen, trying to appear like she was getting something to eat.

Taking the narrow stairs down to the kitchen, she found that this space had been left unattended. She found some salted meat and headed back to the main deck, eating the food idly as she approached the gunwale to watch the market taking place below. As she stood there, her eyes continued to look over every different way she could possibly escape. Though her body felt alive with enough energy to flee, she tried to remain calm and collected so as not to draw attention to herself.

As Maria finished her small meal and looked towards the water below, she wondered if she could simply jump over the edge and swim around the docks and reach the shore a little further down from the market. She wondered if she could use the ships in the harbor as a way to hide from any pirates as she managed to escape and begin her run as far from this town as possible. But as she looked down into the waters below, the colour of the water clear and bright in the morning sun, she knew she wouldn't be able to jump. There was something about the water now that frightened her. Even though she knew how to swim and would be able to do so more easily in trousers than a gown, she couldn't will herself over the gunwale and into the water far below. The thought scared her more than staying upon the pirate ship.

"Beautiful day, isn't it," Captain Maidus said beside her, startling Maria to the point where she clasped her hand over her mouth to



stifle her cry. Her chest rose and fell heavily as she narrowed her eyes at the Captain. She was equally as surprised by his transformation, as he had now donned an admiral's uniform. His long hair had been pulled back to the nape of his neck, allowing him to wear the admiral's hat as show of rank. A rapier was fastened to his waist, his fitting uniform hugging his muscular form. Maria had no difficult time imaging how his appearance would easily win the hearts of many young ladies. But she knew his true character and therefore wasn't easily impressed by his appearance.

"You frightened me," she said, though he clearly understood her reaction. Indeed, he'd been watching her from the doorway of his private quarters, watching to see what she would attempt to do.

"My apologies, Miss Maria. It was not my intention," he said, turning his gaze to the shoreline. "It appears to be a decent day at the market."

Maria followed his line of sight, looking at all the people below at the market. Her eyes often followed one of the pirates in uniform, her mind calling out to those below that these men were actually pirates, and that they weren't to be trusted. But of course, no one heeded her silent warnings. It seemed these pirates were experts at deceiving others.

"Will you not go ashore, Captain Maidus?" Maria asked, hoping to be rid of the man. She'd been clever to avoid him during the day and thankfully had not been summoned to his quarters again since the night he'd kissed her. Now she hoped that he would leave his ship long enough to give her a reprieve, and also allow her a chance to escape.

"I do not leave the ship unless absolutely necessary," he explained, watching her as she looked at the seashore longingly. He could tell she

wanted off this ship and could not fault her for that. He smiled, enjoying the power he held over this young lady, no matter how strong she often appeared.

“These days I’m sure the real navy is keeping an eye out for my ship. I enjoy standing watch in case an English ship comes to port and might give our location away. I could give an order that would bring the crew back to the ship within moments, allowing us to easily escape before the ship is recognized,” Captain Maidus explained as he looked out over the harbor and the only way in or out of the cove. “With the ship still being damaged, I’m not taking any risks.”

Maria turned her eyes towards the Captain, noting the pointed way in which he looked at her. It infuriated her to know that he was not only keeping watching over the ship, but her as well. She sighed, knowing that today was not the day she would be able to make her escape. A part of her wanted to cry, to finally give in to the despair, especially with the shore in sight. But she knew she couldn’t give up. Maria regained her composure with a new sense of determination.

“My men are going to be hungry when they return to the ship this evening. I want you to begin preparing a feast for tonight since Marvin is also on shore gathering supplies. I’ll send men to assist you,” the Captain said, gesturing towards the stairs that led to the kitchen. Maria looked to the shore once more, trying to memorize what land looked like before she walked past the Captain and down into the kitchen. Before too long she was joined by two other pirates who were kind enough to follow her instructions. She counted her few blessings and got to work.

~\*~

By the time the night came, and the ship was sailing back into open waters, Maria’s anger had built to an all-time high. She was angry for

being captured and led away on a pirate ship. She was angry at herself for not finding a way to escape. She was angry at every pirate that came near her and she would often yell, even causing Marvin to shy away from her when he returned to the kitchen with the goods from the market.

When time came for the dinner to be served Maria made herself scarce, not wanting to be a part of the feast that had been stolen from the hard work of others. She was too angry to be around anyone or even eat. Instead, she fled to her small room and stood outside the door, her eyes on the shoreline as it sank further and further into the distance. Away from everyone, she allowed herself to crumble and succumb to the tears that had threatened her all day.

“You worked so hard to make this food that it would be a shame if you didn’t eat any of it,” a voice said, causing Maria to jump and look up at the person. She was surprised to see James through her tears. She quickly wiped her face on her sleeve as she took the plate from him. She wasn’t hungry, but she knew she needed to eat. She started to take small bites of the food with her fingers, her eyes on her plate.

“I have something I want to show you,” James continued. “Come to my room tonight.”

Maria thought about it for a moment, not looking up at him as she wondered what he could possibly want to show her. But when she looked up to tell him that she’d come, he was already gone. She looked around for a moment, and once she realised she was alone again, she simply resigned herself to finishing her gruel, which she had to at least agree tasted better than normal.

Maria thought about James as she set her bowl aside, her eyes drifting out to sea. She was curious about what James had to show her and thought about all the great discussions they’d had while she’d been

recovering from her fall. A part of her missed being able to talk to James every day, getting to see him come into the room and make sure she was comfortable. She also couldn't forget the way in which he'd kissed her, filling her with a warmth she didn't quite understand.

Even though Maria had avoided him ever since the Captain explained to her James' intentions for keeping her healthy and content, she couldn't deny that part of her longed to be near him. She'd seen the way James had been kind to her and always treated her with respect. He never tried to force her to do anything with him, and always made her laugh when they would talk. She had been able to relax around him, and she hadn't felt that way ever since she'd been forced to return to working on the ship.

The more she thought about it, the more she realised how much she'd come to miss being around James. So, as she stood and waited for complete darkness to settle over the ship, she put her mind towards seeing James tonight and truly seeing what he had in store for her. If she was going to spend the rest of her life upon a pirate's ship or as someone's slave, at least tonight she'd allow herself to relax and enjoy the small pleasure of someone's company that *she* wanted to be with. Maria had to enjoy this small freedom while she could.

## Chapter 19

Maria took a deep breath before she knocked softly on James' door. He was quick to answer it and allow her access. As she stepped into the room, he closed the door behind her. Maria turned and looked up into his eyes, the first time she had really looked at him in a week. She'd forgotten how his dark green eyes affected her, causing a blush to spread to her cheeks as she locked eyes with him. He was no longer dressed in a uniform but wearing a simple pair of leather trousers and a muslin shirt, with the first few buttons undone to allow her to glimpse his chest. She remembered placing her hands upon his chest and wondered if he'd allow her to do so now.

Maria saw that James looked anxious, as though waiting for her to make the first move, to say something. She gave him a small smile, trying to reassure him as she finally moved to the bed and sat upon it like she'd done many times before. She motioned for him to join her, which he did without hesitation.

"Did you enjoy your time on shore?" Maria asked, knowing that they should start discussing something instead of simply staring into each other's eyes.

"Indeed, I did. I always enjoy being disguised and being able to convince people I'm someone else," James said with a laugh. Maria tried to laugh with him, but James could tell that she didn't find it amusing because her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. So, James turned his attention to the things he'd collected personally for himself.

"This is for you," James said, taking a flower from a small vase beside the bed and handing it to her. It was a carnation, and as she held the

flower to her nose, she could still smell its fresh aroma. She took a deep breath of it, wishing she was standing on the shoreline smelling these flowers instead of being on the pirate ship.

“Thank you, James. I really appreciate it,” Maria said genuinely as she traced her fingers along the petals, feeling how soft they felt.

“I remembered how you spoke of enjoying the flowers in your gardens,” James admitted. “I wanted to bring you something that brought you pleasure.”

Maria blushed again as she stared into his eyes, thinking of how he often brought her pleasure. She wanted to lean forward and kiss him, to feel his strong arms around her again. But she refrained as she forced herself to look at the carnation again.

“And I also got me a little something that I would gladly share with you,” James said with a smirk as he reached underneath the pillow and brought out a bottle of wine, that shone gold as he held it up to the candlelight. Maria laughed as she looked at the golden liquid.

“I’d be glad to share some with you,” Maria replied as she set the flower aside and leaned back against the hull of the ship. “But I dare not drink as much as I once did.”

James laughed at the shared memory, thinking again of the way Maria had almost drained his water skin of wine when they’d listen to the sound of the guitar. “I will not allow you to drink all my fine wine, Maria. I’ll share, yet not too much.”

James stood then and turned towards his wardrobe. He opened it and started searching through the drawers for two cups he was certain he had. With his back turned to her, she was able to spot a single key hanging from his belt. She thought for a moment, wondering what it could be. She knew that his chest was left unlocked, along with the wardrobe. Then she remembered the lock on the rope that secured the skiffs to the ship.

Maria's mind started to race as she thought about the fact that the ship wasn't too far out at sea. Perhaps if she could steal the key then she could get to a skiff during the night, when fewer people were around to see her, and she could possibly row back to shore. After being mad at herself all day for not finding a way to escape, Maria knew she needed to be willing to take more risks if she was ever going to see her family again.

Standing quietly, Maria's eyes drifted to the dagger that rested on the chest next to James' rapier. She stepped towards it, her palms becoming sweaty as she watched James begin to pour the wine slowly into the cups he'd finally found. She hated to do this, to cause James pain when he'd rescued her after she'd fallen into the water. But she also knew that James was a pirate and would never help her in the end when the Captain decided to be done with her. No matter how hard she tried to win over the crew, to gain their trust, she knew they'd never defy an order from their Captain.

Maria grabbed the dagger and approached James from behind, pointing the end towards his back as she prepared herself for the attack. She'd need to be fast and strike so he wouldn't be able to stop her once she'd stolen the key. She'd even have to silence him before he could scream for help. But as she prepared to drive the dagger into his back, she froze, unable to cause this man harm when her heart beat so fast for him. Her feelings betrayed her as she found her only opportunity to escape fleeing before her eyes.

Memories flashed before Maria's eyes as she remembered what it felt

like to be kissed by James, to feel the heat and passion build between them until all she wanted was to feel his skin against hers. She'd loved feeling his bare skin in her hands. She couldn't deny his kindness when he'd cared for her, keeping her safe in his room and bringing her food and water every day. The kindness he'd shown her wouldn't allow her to do what she needed to.

Perhaps she could just scare him into giving her the key as she pressed the sharp end of the blade against his back, causing him to stiffen. James stood still, feeling the blade against his back, his mind racing to discover what Maria was planning to do.

"I don't want to hurt you, James," Maria said, barely a whisper. When her hand started to shake, James could feel it in the blade against his skin and knew that Maria wouldn't be able to go through with killing him. He sighed as he slowly turned around, a cup of wine in each hand. Even though Maria continued to stand with the dagger pointed towards him, tears clearly in her eyes, James didn't take offense as he slowly set the cups aside, not wanting to spill the wine either.

With a quickness that Maria wasn't expecting, James struck out and grabbed her wrist, squeezing until she was forced to drop the dagger. Fear filled Maria as James pushed her against the bed, holding both of her wrists in his hand as he squeezed, debating what to do with her next.

"I just want the key so I can get to a skiff and get away. The ship can't be that far from shore. I can escape in the night and no one will ever know," Maria said quickly, trying to calm James as he stared at her, anger filling his features. "I would never hurt you, James."

His eyes softened then as he searched her eyes, trying to find the answers to all that he was feeling. He knew he should tie her up and throw her into the slave quarters before reporting her treachery to the



Captain. It would partially be his own fault for having Maria in his room, but he could face any punishment his Captain gave him. But as he looked deeply into Maria's pleading eyes, he knew he would take any punishment for what he was about to do next.

Letting go of Maria's wrists, he instead circled his arms around her as he crashed his lips to hers. Maria was surprised by his actions but was soon caught up in his passionate kiss, having envisioned him doing this to her ever since she'd fallen into the sea. She wanted to feel James' lips upon her, to allow herself to be completely devoured by this man.

Maria was caught up in his kisses, loving the feeling of his tongue over hers as she pulled at his shirt till it came out of his trousers, allowing her to run her hands up his bare chest and feel the sun upon him. James brought her closer to him, wanting to feel her closer. He relished in the feeling of her hands on his chest and broke their kiss just long enough to pull his shirt up over his head, tossing it aside before bringing their lips back together.

James lowered his hands and grabbed Maria's behind, pulling her up onto the bed as he laid her upon it, lowering his body over top of hers. He continued to kiss her, running his hands through her hair as he pressed his hips into hers, wanting her to feel just how much he wanted her in this moment.

It was a new experience for Maria, and as she continued to feel the passion build between them, she allowed James to guide her. She ran her hands over his bare back as she enjoyed feeling his strong muscles flex under her hands. When he pressed his hips into hers, she returned the gesture, enjoying the pleasure that was building up between her legs. Though she understood the basics of procreation, she'd never imagined it would feel like this. And with her future being so uncertain, she was happy to give James this part of her, to have the choice to do so instead of it being taken from her by force.

Maria ran her hands through his silky hair, tugging it lightly as their tongues jostled together. She loved his spicy taste and felt like she'd never get enough of it. James turned her head then, kissing down her face and neck, sending hot waves of pleasure through her body from the spot his lips touched her burning skin. His hands moved expertly over her body, pulling her shirt from her trousers so he could pull it up over her head. Maria leaned forward, allowing him to undress her so she could feel his hot kisses against her skin again.

James was quick to take one of her breasts into his mouth, rolling his tongue over the nipple as Maria arched her back, surprised by the way pleasure sprung from the place James had his mouth on. His one arm snaked around her back, holding her still while he supped from her breast while the other hand rolled her other nipple between his fingers, sending wave after wave over pleasure over her body. When he finished working his tongue on one breast, he moved his head to the other, giving Maria an experience she'd never forget.

Maria closed her eyes as she began to pant, her mind unable to think clearly as the pleasure James was causing her body took over. She ran her fingers through his hair, encouraging him to continue his onslaught on her body. She'd felt despair for so long that she was finally ready to feel the pleasure only a man could give her.

James leaned up and looked into Maria's pleasure-flushed face. He smoothed her hair back as he raised up to kiss her soundly on the mouth again, pressing his hips into her so that she could feel his manhood eagerly waiting to be free from its bonds. Maria moved her hands down his body as she made her way to the front of his trousers, unfastening them so they could be loose enough to slide down his legs. When his manhood sprung free from his trousers, Maria grabbed it experimentally, wrapping both her hands around its length, surprised by the softness of the flesh. James gasped, leaning his head up as he stared into Maria's eyes.

He'd never felt this way for any woman he'd ever been with, and by the attentive way Maria touched him, he could tell that she was inexperienced. James shifted his manhood from her grasp and moved down her body, trailing kisses down her stomach until he reached her own trousers and made quick work of sliding them down her legs. He then began to kiss her around the navel, moving ever slowly towards her budding flower which was scented heavily with her excitement. Maria gasped when he kissed the inside of her thigh, his face so close to her hot core that she could feel his breath grazing against her bud. He kissed all around her opening, sometimes nuzzling her bud with his nose as he pressed his face in the damp curls of her flower.

Maria's moans stopped only when he raised himself back to her face, kissing her again and allowing her to taste her own inner flavor on his tongue. It was a sweet sensation that she fell in love with, lapping at his tongue to taste more. It was only when he pressed his manhood to her opening that she stopped and leaned back into the pillow, her eyes meeting his.

"I'll be gentle," James whispered, stroking the side of her face as his hand trailed down to her waist. The other arm snaked behind her back so he could grip onto her. Then, he pushed his hips forward as Maria spread her legs, eager to feel him inside her depths.

James slipped his manhood into her sopping channel, the tightness of it sending him into a world of pleasure. He went slowly till he felt the thin flesh she'd protected and moved past it, a wave of pain coursing through Maria as she felt it tear. But as James started to move his hips in a rhythm, allowing his manhood to slip in and out of her channel at an alarming rate, she was soon filled with a pleasure unlike anything she'd ever experienced before.

Their breathing came in rough spurts as Maria wrapped her arms around James and lifted her hips to meet his movements. James leaned down and caught her mouth with his as her moans began to

come louder. Maria could feel an intense feeling building between her legs that only continued to intensify every time James sunk into her. She tried to focus on his kisses, on the way his tongue danced with hers, but soon her mind was brought to the sensation growing between them.

James moved up then, taking her further and further until she felt certain there was no space left in her core for him. She arched her back as she was brought to an intense high place that spread from her wet channel all over her body. She moaned loudly as James continued to pump into her, allowing the pleasure to continue for several more moments. Then, James' own moans joined hers as she listened to him come over his own mountain of pleasure that crashed down into her. She felt the warmth inside her core as James' movements slowed. Eventually he pulled out of her, but he didn't move from over her as he continued to kiss her gently.

He trailed his hands over her hot flesh, sending shivers running through her body. She rested her hands on his chest as she kissed him, wanting this feeling to never end. And when she felt the ardor begin to rise again and felt the stiffness of his manhood between her legs once more, she knew that she'd never get enough of the pleasure James caused her.

## Chapter 20

Maria felt like a true woman as she went about her duties in the following days. She now understood what it meant to make love, to feel cherished by a man, and to bare one's soul to another. She felt like even though she was stuck on a pirate ship, her future always uncertain, she could at least enjoy parts of life that hadn't been denied to her.

No matter what duties Maria had been assigned, she would always find a way to see James during the day. When she would spend a day lopping rope together, her eyes would search out James. As their eyes would meet, they'd gaze longingly at each other, only breaking sight when they were forced to. Days when Maria was assigned to work in the kitchen, she'd take time to serve the other pirates, always bringing James something a little extra, and even oranges when she could smuggle them out of the kitchen. Their days consisted of finding spare moments to be together, even if it was just to brush against each other in passing.

At night, Maria would wait till it was dark and the ship was quiet before she'd tip-toe lightly to James' room. There, together they'd explore all manner of passion as they brought each other to new highs again and again. Maria and James couldn't get enough of being able to touch each other's bare skin. Sometimes they'd even just cuddle on the bed, naked and together, as though the world outside the bedroom door didn't matter.

And though they were both careful not raise anyone's suspicions of them, even having to cover each other's mouths while they made love to each other, there was one who could see through any layer of deception. As a master of fooling others, especially his own crew, Captain Maidus was able to spot the way Maria and James looked at

each other during the day; the flush in Maria's face and the yearning in James' eyes.

At first, when Captain Maidus started watching the two from the cover of his private quarters, looking out the peephole of his door, the sight of them near each other, lightly touching their hands together in passing, had filled the Captain with rage. He wanted to humiliate James in front of the crew and throw Maria back into the slave quarters. But the more he watched, the more he began to lust after Maria.

At times the Captain would pace in his room, thinking of how he'd like to handle the matter. He could kill them both, punish them for the way they acted together. Perhaps he could get more proof, have Horus watch over Maria at night and see what was going on while everyone else was sleeping. The Captain had plans to sell Maria once they reached Tripoli, knowing that Maria would fetch a high price for being an innocent. But if she would be willing to share his bed, the Captain would at least consider selling her to a kinder master. Then, a plan came to mind. The Captain could accuse Maria of not fulfilling one of her duties, and blame her for stealing or plotting to cause mutiny amongst the crew with her womanly ways.

"Yes," Captain Maidus spoke out loud to himself as he paced rapidly in his room in front of the desk. "I'll have her thrown into the slave quarters and make the crew turn against her. Then, I'll bring her back here in the dead of night and make her an offer she can't refuse. I'll bed that wench before James has a chance." Being filled with resolve, Captain Maidus set out from his quarters to confront Maria and finally take her before the clock could strike midnight tonight.

"Oh, Miss Maria," the Captain called as he crossed the main deck, gathering a crowd with him as the crew stopped to see what their Captain was about to do.

Maria had been on the starboard side of the ship, washing the deck with her filthy mop. She didn't know if her work had allowed the ship's deck to appear any cleaner, but she had tried her best. When she heard the Captain call out her name, fear filled her. She turned just as the man struck her, the back of his hand hitting the side of her face so hard that she hit the deck with a thud.

Murmuring filled her ears as she slowly turned her head towards the Captain, anger filling her as she waited to hear what the reason for this outbreak was. Her green eyes pierced his, causing the Captain to hesitate before he addressed his crew.

"Men, I've discovered that this wench has been stealing oranges and hiding them in her room!" he shouted over the men, causing some to cry out in outrage. "She's been using her female ways to deceive you and has been stealing whenever she gets the chance. I fear I've become too lenient and must punish this girl for turning her back on the crew!"

Shouts of agreement rose up in the air while others considered the Captain, wondering if his words were true. Their thoughts were voiced as someone spoke up from the crowd, saying, "What proof do you have?" All eyes turned and focused on James as he pushed his way to the front of the men. Murmurs continued as the eyes of the crewmen started to dart between the Captain and one of the most trusted pirates on the ship.

James came to stand in front of the Captain, his own anger boiling to the top as he glanced down at Maria to where she'd fallen after being struck. James wanted to deal the same damage to the Captain but decided to hurt the man in another way.

"How dare you oppose me, James? Do you really not believe the

words I have spoken?" Captain Maidus asked, a chuckle rising from his voice, a few around him joining in.

"I believe only what I can see, Captain. You taught me never to take a man for his word and only see the truth with my own eyes. So, Captain Maidus, what proof do you have that Maria has been stealing and keeping oranges in her room?" James asked, not willing to back down this time. He'd be damned if he let anyone harm Maria or have her tied up and thrown back into the slave quarters.

A few started to murmur in agreement with James, causing the Captain to look around him in wonder. Had he acted in haste? Would there really be those of his crew who would oppose him and demand proof as James had? Captain Maidus shook his head as he pointed a finger at James. "You can join that wench in the slave quarters if you dare defy me, James!" the Captain yelled, hushed murmurs circling around them as everyone waited to see what James would do next.

The moment that James' fist connected with the Captain's face, all hell broke loose on the ship. At first, it was crew members trying to pry James off the Captain. There seemed to be a division amongst the crew as other skirmishes broke out. Maria pulled herself up to her feet and made a mad dash for the wheelhouse, knowing she couldn't fight and needed to get to safety.

But the next thing everyone realised was that the ship was being attacked. Cannon fire reigned around them as several impacts hit the hull, sending shockwaves through the ship. Maria stumbled, her footing uncertain as she continued on her way to the wheelhouse. She crawled up the stairs as debris flew around her, panic filling her chest as she tried to work out what was happening around her.

As Maria reached the wheel, which had been abandoned, she looked out over the main deck as pirates scrambled to see a ship swiftly



approaching. She casted her eyes to the ship's flags, a wave of relief crashing over her as she noticed England's flag sailing proudly. She couldn't believe that the pirate ship was being attacked, or that no one had seen an enemy approaching. The Captain's accusation of her had brought everyone's attention to the Captain and had allowed the English ship to attack without further notice.

Now, Maria watched as cannon fire came again from the English ship, creating holes in the ship. Captain Maidus was quick to give orders, to have his pirate crew fire back on the English ship, but they were too slow, too disoriented from the fight they'd waged on each other. Soon, the English ship was close enough that the men in uniform could fire their rifles onto the main deck.

Horror filled Maria's eyes as bloodshed commenced in front of her. First, she cowered around her feet, wanting to turn her eyes from the fight. Then she made herself move as she climbed down the wheelhouse and made it to her room, closing the door behind her and landing hard on the floor as a cannon hit close by. She screamed in response as her hands covered her ears, trying to block out the cries and sounds of death. She prayed it would be over soon, that she'd survive the attack and perhaps finally be rescued. But as her thoughts began to wonder, she thought of James.

Here she was cowering on the floor when she knew that James would be out there fighting for his life. Should she go to him and try to protect him from the English? Would they recognize her, a lady dressed as a man with tanned skin and little resemblance to a lady? As the sounds of rifle fire ceased, Maria knew that she needed to try to save James before her chance was gone.

Pushing herself to her feet, Maria walked carefully from her room. The deck was splintered from cannon fire, making Maria walk slowly down the stairs in case the wood caved in and she fell to the decks below. Reaching the main deck, Maria's eyes glazed over at the chaos. Men lay dying or dead – men she'd been forced to live by for the last

five weeks.

Amongst the dead she spotted Louis, his lifeless eyes looking back at her as his body lay crumbled on the deck, riddled with gunshot wounds. She cried then, thinking that such an innocent man shouldn't have received such a fate. As her eyes continued to wander, she watched as the English stormed the ship, quick to either kill or capture those who opposed them. Several had surrendered and were now awaiting the moment that they'd be shot down or bound for trial.

Maria didn't hear much of what was happening as shock washed over her. There was so much blood and death that she couldn't quite rationalize what she was doing. Why had she left her room? Who was she looking for?

She felt a hand on her shoulder and immediately turned around. A navy officer stood in front of her, his eyes narrowing at her as he realised that she wasn't a pirate, or a man for that matter. He shouted something over her, causing other navy officers to surround her. She felt all eyes on her as she folded her arms around her, knowing that these men were Englishmen and would judge her for the way she looked. Maria might as well have been standing in a ballroom dressed as she was with every eye of the Ton upon her, already deciding her fate amongst them. She'd be an outcast for the rest of her life, no matter how foul the experience she'd just endured had been.

Maria felt startled then when a young man pushed past the group of officers surrounding her. She couldn't believe her eyes as they settled on the man's blond hair and his bright blue eyes. She was shocked all over again as her brother Gregory wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight against his body that smelled just like home. Maria crumbled then, relief falling over her as it finally dawned on her that her brother had come to rescue her. She didn't know at the time how all of this could be possible and wondered if she was dreaming still, lying in bed with James after another night of love making.

But as Maria felt her brother gather her in his arms and start walking towards the English ship that now had planks connecting it to the pirate's ship, Maria knew she wasn't dreaming. Sound seemed to come back to her as pirates were taken hostage and quickly brought on the deck of the English navy ship as the Emerald began to sink into the sea. Cries of agony and gunshot continued to ring out, but the further Gregory carried her away, the less the sound assaulted her ears. The emotion of it all astonished her, causing her to faint in her brother's arms.

## Chapter 21

Visions passed before Maria's eyes as she dreamed. She saw blood and gore around her as she tried to look through the bodies on the main deck for a familiar face. Tempests swirled around her as the sound of thunder rang out. Sometimes she'd feel weighed down by the dead bodies, as though she was drowning in them. And just when she'd lost all hope, he'd reach through the chaos and grab her hand, bringing her back to the surface and into pure white light.

Maria startled forward, her eyes opening to an unfamiliar place. Panic ran through her as she quickly looked around the room, holding a blanket to her chest. She appeared to be in a small cabin upon a ship as she felt the familiar sway around her. The room was rather elegant and as she looked around her to see what she'd been sleeping on, she was rather surprised to find herself in a bed much like her own back in London. Memories flooded her mind as she remembered the attack on the pirate ship, seeing her brother amongst all the navy officers.

When she heard snoring, she looked towards the sound in the corner and realised that Gregory was sleeping in a chair behind the bed. She stood then, slightly embarrassed to be still dressed in men's trousers and a muslin shirt, and went to Gregory to wake him, slowly nudging his shoulder until his bright blue eyes opened to hers.

"Maria, you're awake," Gregory exclaimed as he quickly stood and wrapped his arms around her. "My God, have I prayed hard for this moment."

Maria couldn't help the tears that came to her eyes as she held her brother. She smiled and laughed with him, relieved to be with him.

She leaned back after a while so she could see him clearly and took a moment to wipe the tears from his eyes.

“You’ve always been so protective of me, Gregory. But you’ll have to forgive me for losing hope of being rescued a long time ago,” Maria admitted as they sat together in two wingback chairs that framed a small window. Maria could look out and watch the sea as the ship sailed quickly across the waters.

“I don’t fault you for that, my dear sister. It’s been almost two months since the attack on Portsmouth. I would be a liar if I said that there weren’t moments when I too lost hope,” Gregory said, still holding his sister’s hand as though afraid that at any moment he might lose her again.

“You must tell me all of what has happened, Gregory. I must know how our parents are faring and however you came to be on a navy ship this far south,” Maria said, wanting to know so badly what had transpired since she was away.

“Worry not, Maria. When I left the ports of England, Mother and Father were well enough. Mother has been fairly weak since you’d been kidnapped since she’s been very worried with grief. But I hope that the knowledge of me leaving aboard a navy ship brought her some peace. And since there is no mail ship faster than the ship we currently sail on, we will then be able to share the good news together,” Gregory explained as he squeezed Maria’s hand. He simply hoped that his words would ring true and that their mother would still be with the living when they returned.

“And this ship, Gregory. How did you convince the navy to come after me?” Maria wondered, looking around the fine room and thinking that this room wasn’t as lavish as the Captain’s room aboard the pirate’s ship. There were gold and silver inlays in the carved wood,

and small designs that adorned the rafters, making her feel more like she was in a sitting room than aboard a ship.

“You’ll have to thank Lord Crawford for that, my dear. You see, his uncle, Lord Cardinal, is very close friends with Admiral Reed. Fitz and I rode to London and spoke with his uncle, and eventually the admiral. After a bit of rearranging schedules, I set off aboard the admiral’s ship with his crew. We’ve been searching every port from England to here, hoping to catch word of you. When we stopped at the last Spanish port and heard that a ship fitting the description of the pirates was given, we set off in haste and eventually came upon that very ship. And well, you know the rest from there,” Gregory said, watching Maria carefully. He feared for her health, not knowing what she’d endured over these last weeks. Her skin was very tanned, and her hair appeared to have been unbrushed since he’d last seen her. She wore fitting men’s clothing which were rather dirty. But he couldn’t judge her, unable to imagine what she’d been forced to do.

“I’m so happy to see you,” Maria said, focusing her gaze on him, praying this wasn’t all a dream.

“And I you, Maria,” Gregory said with a large smile. “I’m going to let the admiral know that you are awake. I’m also going to see what I can do about arranging a bath for you. I did take the liberty of bringing some of your things with me and you’ll find them in the chest at the foot of the bed.” Maria let go of Gregory’s hand as he stood, missing the comfort it brought her already. But she stood with him also as she approached the chest and opened it, the smell of home reaching her nose as she carefully traced her finger over some of her favorite gowns. She dared not touch them because her fingers were so dirty.

“Maria,” Gregory spoke up, drawing her attention back to him. “The admiral will want to hear your story of what happened since you’ve been kidnapped. He reassured me that your words would be kept confidential and only used to press charges against the pirates.”

Maria stiffened a little at the thought of having to explain all that had happened to her. Though she felt justified in all of her actions, from wearing men's clothing to being friendly with the pirates, the thought of sharing those details with a stranger didn't settle well with her. Especially since the name Admiral Reed sounded familiar to her, and yet she couldn't remember why at the moment.

"Of course, Gregory. I'm sure you too are curious," Maria said with a small smile.

He nodded his head as he looked her over once more. He hoped that in time her tanned skin would fade, and perhaps by next Season she'd be ready to appear in society once more. He just hoped that her innocence was still intact and hadn't been stolen from her.

"When you are ready, Maria," Gregory assured her. "But for now, let me look into having a bath drawn for you and we can get you cleaned up."

"Thank you, Gregory, for everything," Maria said as the tears started to build up in her eyes again.

"Fear not, dear sister. You are safe now," Gregory said as he opened the door and stepped out, closing it firmly behind him.

Maria took several deep breaths as she walked over to the window to watch the sea passing by. She was filled with so many emotions as she tried to convince herself that she was truly headed back to England. The idea filled her with joy as she thought of being reunited with her mother and father again. She promised to never say another harsh

word to her father again and that she would kiss her mother on the cheek every chance she got. Maria also thought of convincing her family to move out to the country for a while so she could regain some peace of mind.

Then Maria's thoughts turned back to James and she dearly wondered if he was even still alive. Maria hoped that he'd been one of the pirates that had been taken captive and not slain. But Maria knew in her heart that if James wasn't already dead, he was going to be soon once they reached England. The pirates would be tried and hung for sure. As Maria watched the water continue to rush by the ship, she knew that she had to find a way to save James if he wasn't already dead.



## Chapter 22

Bathing in a tub of hot water with a fresh bar of soap felt like heaven to Maria. After Gregory had returned with a few officers, carrying a small brass tub and several buckets of hot water, she watched in awe as the bath was prepared for her. And once left alone, she'd quickly stripped off her clothes and stepped into the water, allowing her muscles to finally relax.

She'd stayed in the tub till the water began to cool, scrubbing every inch of her body, making sure there was no dirt left under or around her fingernails. She washed her hair three times without ever really feeling that it was completely clean, but not wanting to catch a cold by sitting in the water for too long after it had begun to chill she'd forced herself to get out.

After Maria had finished with her bath and dried herself in a plush towel that felt wonderful against her skin, she'd dressed in one of her favorite gowns. Maria finally felt like herself again as she felt the satin gown underneath her hands, the pale-yellow colour making her feel like a real lady again instead of a pirate's captive. Sitting down in a chair, Maria spent a long time brushing out her golden hair as it dried. When she was finished, she pinned it up and sighed with relief. Now she was Miss Maria Livingston once again.

About this time, Gregory returned with a few officers who were quick to remove the tub. They waited till the officers were gone and they were alone once more.

"I dare say, sister. You appear to have been transformed in a matter of hours," Gregory said as he took Maria's hand and pulled her to her

feet, having her twirl for him. She laughed as he looked at her appearance. “Despite your tanned skin, I wouldn’t say that you’ve changed at all.”

“That is very kind of you to say, Gregory,” Maria said as she withdrew her hand from his. She held her hands tightly together in front of her as tears pricked her eyes. “I hope others will be as kind as you.”

Gregory noticed her tears and quickly drew his sister into his arms. “Shh now, Maria. Do not fear so. I will not allow anyone to say an unkind thing to you. No one could fault you based on what you’ve had to endure,” Gregory said as he held his sister close, his own tears coming to his eyes. He had to admit that her tanned skin would set her apart from other debutantes, and as he held her close, he could tell that she’d become rather muscular. But he also knew that these characteristics would fade in time and she would be found beautiful once again by many eligible gentlemen.

“You must be famished,” Gregory said, leaning away from Maria as he took her hand and led her to the door. “The admiral has prepared a feast in celebration of your rescue. I’m sure things are in order and we can go down for dinner.”

Maria simply nodded her head and put on a smile for Gregory as she allowed him to lead her from the room. He tucked her arm in his as he led her down a lit hallway, so unlike the dark ones she’d been used to on the pirate’s ship, and up a small set of stairs to the main deck.

Maria looked around in wonder as she watched the navy officers hard at work. The ship seemed to be sailing at a fast pace as the winds filled the sails, pulling hard and propelling it forward over the smooth waters. Maria raised her hand against the sun, shielding her eyes as she looked around, allowing Gregory to lead her up another flight of stairs. Maria saw that the wheelhouse was close to the door Gregory

brought them to. It all seemed so familiar to Maria, and she thought that perhaps all ships were designed in the same fashion.

But when Gregory opened the door and led her in, Maria could tell she was no longer on a pirate's ship. The wooden floor was dark and polished, fitting for a ballroom floor. Chandeliers hung from the rafters, swinging idly to the sway of the ship, and casting a glowing light around the room. It appeared that this room had been designed for meeting and dining as a large dining table spread across the course of the room. Several officers milled about with glasses of brandy in hand, and when they spotted Gregory leading Maria into the room, they turned their attention to her and began to applaud.

Maria wasn't expecting such a warm reception as she curtsied. A blush came to her cheeks as she met the gazes of all the officers, wondering what they thought of her now. But she put on a strong face, as she had done many times before, and prepared to socialize politely for the first time in months.

"There is our lady of the house," a man said coming towards them. He wore several medals on his officer's coat, showing Maria that this man must be the admiral.

"Good evening, Admiral Reed," Maria said with another curtsy.

The older man flashed her a pleased smile as he bowed. He then took her hand and kissed the air above it. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Maria. It fills me with great joy to see you rescued from the pirates, and to be able to capture many of them to return them to England. The people will want to punish those who killed so many in the Portsmouth attack. We'll all be heroes, even you, Miss Maria," he said as he led them to the table, taking the time to seat Maria properly. The officers in the room took the signal to be seated as well as the dinner commenced.

“You’ll have to forgive me, Admiral, but I don’t see myself very much as a hero. I’m simply grateful to you and your men. I’m grateful today to be alive and reunited with my brother,” Maria said, giving Gregory a smile as she focused on her food. The aromas made her mouth water, and had she been on the pirates’ ship, she would have devoured her food quickly with her fingers. But now that she was present amongst Englishmen again, she carefully picked up her fork and began taking dainty bites, much like her mother had taught her.

“You’ll be the talk of the town, Miss Maria, as everyone will want to know your story. How you survived living with pirates for two months, and your experience of being rescued,” Admiral Reed said with a chuckle as he ate. Maria thought of the man as rather odd, but as a memory slipped into her mind, she began to realise why this admiral would be after fame. She remembered his name from the time she’d dined with Captain Maidus, and how the Captain had told of the few gentlemen he’d blackmailed into doing his bidding.

Maria did her best to keep her composure during the dinner, knowing that this admiral had been the one to forge the papers needed for Captain Maidus to appear as a privateer. If it hadn’t been for Admiral Reed’s visits to the gaming halls, then she wouldn’t have been in this situation in the first place. But this was not the place or time to discuss such matters, and therefore she did her best to appear pleasant and grateful.

“Gregory, tell me more of England. I want to know about our family, the weather, perhaps what my dear friend Charlotte has been up to,” Maria said, focusing her attention on her brother instead of on the animated way in which the admiral spoke of the great reward they were bound to receive upon returning the pirates to England.

Gregory smiled as he took a long sip from his wine glass. Maria hadn’t

touched her wine and had only focused on drinking as much water as possible. She wondered if she'd ever drink wine again and not feel her heart beat for James. She pushed those thoughts out of her mind as she focused on her brother.

“Once Charlotte learned of your plight, and after receiving your invitation to stay with the family for the summer, she was quick to come to our townhouse in Portsmouth. She arrived shortly after Lord Crawford and I arrived in London to speak with our connections. And she's been there ever since, tending to Mother personally. I think it has helped Mother's condition greatly to have another young woman in the house who is so familiar with you. I will speak honestly and say that Mother had not been faring well when I first left for London and I had even feared her passing,” Gregory explained as he rested his fork for a moment, his eyes seeming far off.

Maria reached out her hand and squeezed Gregory's quickly before returning her hands to her lap. “I am very grateful to Charlotte then, and can't wait to see her again,” Maria replied as she turned back to her meal. “And what of Lord Crawford? How was he when you last left England?”

Gregory sighed then as he shifted his gaze to Maria. “He was very worried about you, my dear sister. He did work hard to orchestrate this rescue mission. Our father was kind enough to fund the venture as Lord Crawford did his best to organize it. I dare say, his years of studying the navy and sailing charts really paid off. He and Admiral Reed created quite a rescue plan that worked beautifully,” Gregory said, though when he smiled at Maria, she could tell that it didn't quite reach his eyes. She knew this to be one of his fake smiles, having watched him since she was very young, and therefore decided to speak to him concerning the matter when they could speak freely.

After the dinner came to an end and the officers bid Maria goodnight, she and Gregory remained behind to speak to Admiral Reed. Maria knew that sooner or later she'd have to tell her story, and she was at

least grateful that she didn't need to speak in front of so many. With it simply being her and Gregory with the admiral, she felt slightly more comfortable.

"It seems the day is done and all that is left is for idle talk before nightfall," the admiral said, giving Maria a kind smile. "I will say, my dear, how terribly sorry I am that you had to endure living on a pirate ship for so many months. I promise that I will do my absolute best to ensure that these pirates are hung for their crimes."

Maria tried not to grimace at the thought of seeing anyone hang, but she wondered if she'd enjoy watching Captain Maidus suffer. Maria pushed that thought out of her mind as she forced a small smile onto her face.

"I appreciate all that you've done for me, Admiral Reed. It was your ship and men that made my rescue possible, and for that my family will always be indebted to you," Maria replied, truly grateful to be off the dreaded pirate ship, even when she feared the worst for James.

"It is simply my duty to England and her people, Miss Maria. I am pleased that we had great success, and will be able to return to England as quickly as the winds will take us," Admiral Reed said as he raised his glass of port to his lips and took a long drink. Setting the glass down again, he said, "Now, Miss Maria, I will have to ask you what transpired since your kidnapping. Your testimony will be used when trying these criminals at the Admiralty Court."

"Of course, Admiral," Maria said as she took a deep breath before beginning her story. She described how she'd reacted during the attack on Portsmouth and how she'd been discovered and kidnapped by a pirate. She did not go into detail of what it was like to be bound and tied, left in the slave quarters, or how she'd tried to get free until her wrists had bled. She idly rubbed them as she told her tale in brief,

thinking that the worst of her capture had been over weeks ago.

Maria then talked of the deal that was made between her and Captain Maidus, that if she worked like one of the pirates, then he'd treat her the same as long as she didn't try to escape. Maria detailed the work she'd done on the ship, and even made a few jokes about how Mother would be proud of the dishes she'd created. Maria commented that she had needed to find joy wherever she could to keep the despair from ruling her.

Finally, Maria explained how the pirate ship had collided with a reef, how she'd fallen into the water and was rescued by a pirate. She explained that she'd been allowed to rest and heal, that she reasoned the Captain had plans to sell her when they reached Tripoli but had to stop at a nearby port to make repairs.

After she'd finished speaking, the admiral took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. "I dare say, Miss Maria, if it hadn't been for the pirate's ship hitting that reef and taking on damage, we'd never would have caught up with the ship and rescued you. There is a god in Heaven looking over you, I would say."

Maria simply nodded her head in response to the admiral's kind words. She didn't like to think of what would have happened to her if the navy ship hadn't attacked when it had. It was chaos on the ship before it was attacked. But at least she'd be with James right now, no matter what had happened. She was thankful to have been rescued but feared what had become of James.

"Admiral, what will happen to the pirates you captured once we return to England?" Maria asked, surprising the admiral with her question. But as he saw fear in her eyes, he considered how fearful Maria might still be of the pirates who were now chained and stored deep within the ship.

“Fear not, Miss Maria. When the ship lands, the prisoners will be taken to the Execution Dock at the bank of the Thames. They’ll be jailed and subjected to the full weight of the magistrates. In time, they’ll be transferred to the Admiralty Court for trial, and no doubt hanged for their deceitful crimes,” Admiral Reed explained.

“It sounds like a rather lengthy process for pirates to be tried and hanged,” Gregory commented as he took a long drink of his port. Maria sighed, feeling that she wouldn’t have very much time to rescue James if he was numbered in the ones taken aboard the ship. She felt overwhelmed then as she thought of seeing him hang by the neck with the other pirates.

“You’ll have to excuse me, Admiral Reed. I wish to rest now,” Maria said as she pressed her hand to her forehead.

“Of course, my dear,” the admiral exclaimed as he rose from the table, quick to pull out her chair. As she stood, she took Gregory’s arm once again, pretending to need the support.

“Rest well, Miss Maria. And fear not,” Admiral Reed said in parting as Gregory led her from the large room.

Night had completely fallen as they stepped out onto the main deck. The wind felt cold against her cheeks as Maria held tightly to Gregory. They walked quickly across the deck to the stairs that led down into private quarters. As soon as they stepped down into the narrow hallway, already they could feel the reprieve from the wind. They did not speak until they were once again in the room that Maria had woken in that afternoon.



"I would never imagine it being this cold out at sea," Gregory said as he rubbed his hands together. Maria went to the chest at the foot of the bed and opened it once again, pulling out a shawl and wrapping it quickly around her shoulders.

"I suppose summer is almost over and the colder months will be upon England before too long," Maria said as she sat heavily into a chair, trying to hide a yawn with the back of her hand. She hadn't acted ladylike in so long that it had been quite exhausting to do so at dinner, as though she was pretending to be someone she wasn't.

"Perhaps we'll bring winter with our return to England. It will be some time yet before this ship makes it all the way home," Gregory said as he sat across from Maria, not quite wanting to leave her just yet. Though he'd been assigned to a cabin just across the hallway, he didn't like being away from her when he'd just received her back into his life. He didn't dare think of the relief it caused him to see her alive or else he'd begin to cry again.

They sat in silence for a while, simply listening to the ocean crash around them. Once the sound of the ocean had brought Maria great comfort, and now she wished to be rid of it. Maria reckoned that she'd never set foot on a ship again after returning to England, that perhaps she'd never want to gaze at the ocean again.

"Maria, I want to ask you something," Gregory said softly, pulling Maria's sleepy gaze to him. His face looked worrisome and she was curious to know what Gregory would ask of her. She simply nodded her head, trying to encourage him.

"I'm sure you only included the most necessary facts when you told Admiral Reed your story. I have no doubt thinking correctly that there

are many gruesome details you did leave out,” Gregory said, watching Maria carefully as she turned her gaze away from him and only simply nodded, affirming what Gregory was saying was true.

“And that, dear sister, is why I’m curious to know if these pirates did force themselves onto you... I want to know if they hurt you in that manner, Maria,” Gregory said softly, not wanting to embarrass Maria or cause her any more pain.

With tears in her eyes, Maria explained, “No, Gregory. They did not steal my virtue. I was kissed upon by the Captain once, but he did not take from me anything. He explained that I would be worth more at the slave market if I was still pure, and therefore he did well to protect me from those who would have hurt me in that way.”

Maria heard Gregory sigh in relief. She knew that he would think of her as still pure, still innocent, but she wasn’t about to share the details of how she’d given her virtue freely to James or try to explain to Gregory how she felt for the man. No, even Gregory wouldn’t understand how her heart came to beat fast for the very man who’d kidnapped her.

“I am thankful to hear so, Maria. I surely did fear the worst,” Gregory said as he rose. He bent down and kissed the top of Maria’s head then and she reached up and patted him on the shoulder. “Get some rest now. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Maria looked up to her brother as he straightened up, his tears very visible in the lantern light. She smiled at him and nodded her head, knowing that they didn’t need words any longer. They were both dreadfully tired and she knew she would need to rest in order to regain her strength.

When Gregory left the room, she stood and readied herself for bed, placing her gown gently in the chest when she had finished dressing for bed. It almost felt strange to be getting into a bed instead of lying on the wooden planks with nothing but a blanket and pillow.

As she laid her head down on the plush pillow, she thought of James and of having spent so many nights together in his bed. She closed her eyes and thought of him, of being together in his arms with no articles of clothing between them. In her chemise and nightgown, underneath the layers of blankets, Maria almost felt like she couldn't breathe, having to push back some of the blankets in order to feel comfortable again. She'd gotten so used to wearing nothing when she would sleep with James that now the clothes felt burdensome to her. But she dared not undress and lay with nothing under the covers in case her brother would see her in the morning. Now that she was on an English ship, she had to be more careful.

As sleep came to claim her once again for a night of rest, Maria kept in her mind the image of James, of the way he laughed, and the way he stared into her eyes as they made love. She knew in her heart that James couldn't be dead if she still felt this way and prayed that soon she'd find a way to sneak down to see the prisoners and confirm that he was still alive.

## Chapter 23

The next morning at breakfast, Admiral Reed made the announcement to Maria and Gregory that he'd be interrogating the Captain of the pirate ship this afternoon and asked if Maria would want to join them in order to help determine if the Captain was lying or not. They were both surprised by the announcement as they fixed their eyes on the admiral.

"With all due respect, Admiral, I don't think it would be appropriate for my sister to be anywhere around the pirates after all she has endured," Gregory spoke up, resting his hand on top of Maria's in support.

"I would agree, Mr. Livingston, but it's crucial to our investigation that our reports are accurate," the admiral replied, not willing to back down from the matter.

"I suggest a compromise, Admiral, as I don't want to ever see Captain Maidus alive," Maria spoke up, straightening her posture. "I'd be happy to discuss the matter privately after you've interrogated the pirate. We can discuss what you've learned, and I'd be willing to confirm or deny any allegations."

"Maria, you shouldn't have to do anything more than you've already done," Gregory protested, but Maria tried to pacify him with her words.

"It will only be a light conversation with Admiral Reed. It's not like I'll

be standing in front of a courtroom full of people,” Maria said, turning her gaze them back to the admiral.

“Very well then, my dear. I find that idea reasonable enough. I’ll have one of my officers collect you after the interrogation is through that we might find truth or error in the pirate’s words,” Admiral Reed agreed, dismissing everyone then as the meal came to an end.

Maria was happy enough to leave the room with Gregory and return to her quarters. She had no need to take a walk along the main deck for she didn’t want to have to socialize with any of the officers. There was a sense of safety in the small cabin and being able to look upon her own personal things brought her a small comfort. At least here in the room she could let down her guard and simply rest.

“You don’t have to do this, Maria,” Gregory said once they were alone in her room.

Maria sighed as she turned her eyes towards Gregory, her thoughts spinning as she thought about what she wanted to say to Admiral Reed in private. “I believe it will give me some peace of mind to be able to aid in securing the trial of these pirates. I never want to see them again, and yet I need to ensure that I never will,” Maria explained, pouring truth into her words even though she had an alternative reason to seek a private discussion with the admiral.

“Would you like me to at least accompany you?” Gregory offered, not liking this idea at all. He wanted to protect his sister from ever having to deal with another unpleasant situation again.

“No, Gregory. You’ve already done enough. It seems that we should both try to rest as much as we can,” Maria said, looking around the

room in the hopes of finding something to fill her time instead of simply sleeping.

Noticing the way her eyes traveled around the room, Gregory went to a small dresser and opened the top drawer, pulling out a few books. He handed them to Maria then, knowing how much she loved to read. "I found these while I was idly looking through the ship while we sailed south in search of you. When I found them, they made me think of you and how you'd want something to read after you'd been rescued," Gregory explained as he handed them to Maria.

She smiled brightly, having wished for books for so long. She held them to her chest then as she looked up at her brother. "Thank you, Gregory. You have no idea how much this means to me. I've been in want of literature for so long that I've felt a thirst I haven't been able to quench," Maria said, moving to a chair so she could read over the titles and see which one she'd want to read first.

"Of course, Maria. I'm happy to oblige. I'll see you for the next meal," Gregory said in parting, closing the door behind him.

Maria turned her attention to the novels in her hand, excited to fill her mind and time with something that would give her pleasure. How dearly she wanted to escape her reality and fall deeply into a book. As she began to read, she lost herself in the pages, happy to have a break from pirates and death.

~\*~

Though Gregory had been heavily against Maria attending the interrogation of the pirate Captain, he ensured his own presence in the room when the pirate was brought forth before the admiral. The

dining table had been pushed up against the wall, a single chair remaining in the middle of the room as the prisoner was brought forth and sat forcefully into the chair, the chains around his arms and legs clanking together in a high-pitched *ting-ting*. Gregory grimaced at the sight of the man, bloody and filthy, his hair matted to his face from sweating in the humid cells below. The stench alone made Gregory want to flee from the room and seek a breath of fresh air. He simply couldn't imagine how Maria had endured being surrounded by such filthy men.

"Captain Maidus," Admiral Reed said with a sneer.

"At your service," the pirate Captain replied with a small smile on his face. Admiral Reed was quick to slap the proud smile off the pirate's face, sending the man falling to the floor. Gregory was surprised by the outburst, but did his best to keep his composure as none of the other officers in the room shifted even an inch over their Captain's actions. No one helped the pirate up as the man was forced to right himself back into the chair all on his own.

"You will not speak unless asked to," Admiral Reed said as he spoke over the man.

"Do you have any idea who you are speaking to?" Captain Maidus responded, not afraid of this admiral. "I have papers detailing my contract with the English navy. There are those in England who possess copies of these papers and who will vouch for me in court."

Admiral Reed slapped the man again, this time causing the pirate to simply slouch down into the chair, unable to defend himself. "Do you really think the navy will honor any deals when you've attacked an English port, killed dozens of people, stolen goods and kidnapped a daughter from a prestigious family? There is nothing you can do or say that is going to save you from your impending fate," the admiral

said once he had forced the pirate to look at him. But as Admiral Reed looked into the eyes of the pirate, something that looked like surprise crossed the admiral's face. Gregory noticed the expression that moved over the admiral before he was able to cover it up again with a glare of anger.

"Do you remember me now, Admiral Reed? Do you remember the deal we made?" the pirate said with a low chuckle that rumbled deeply in his chest. "If you send me to trial, I'll tell the Court of England everything."

"Then it seems that you'll never make it to trial, you treacherous snake. The good Lord only knows the number of men you've swindled and blackmailed into doing your bidding. I'll be doing the whole of England a service by ensuring your timely death at sea, that the ocean might swallow up your secrets," Admiral Reed said, his face turning red with his anger.

"But you can't," the pirate said with a sneer. "Unlike myself, you are bound to laws and a King. You have no power."

"Here at sea, I hold all the power," Admiral Reed replied, a sickly grin crossing his face as he motioned towards his officers. "Throw him overboard."

Shock crossed the pirate's face, his eyes growing wide and pleading even before he spoke. "Please, I'll do anything. Just let me go!" the pirate begged as he started to kick and scream. Admiral Reed turned his back to him as the pirate was dragged away. The man's screams could be heard all across the main deck till they echoed from far below. A splash was heard, and then nothing.



The remaining officers filed out of the room next, not speaking a word or appearing to be affected by their admiral's orders. They too felt that they had done service to England by ensuring the death of the pirate Captain. With a man who claimed to have connections in London, it was better that man died now and be reported to have died during the capturing of the pirates. It was only Gregory who remained behind to address the admiral.

"Sir, I don't care to know what the pirate was referring to, and I promise to never breathe a word of what I just saw to anyone. I feel you've done my family a great service by simply ensuring that man never breathes again," Gregory said calmly to the admiral, hoping to reassure the man that he wouldn't report the man's crimes.

"I appreciate your discretion, Mr. Livingston. There were many dark secrets tied to that man, and I'm sure there will be many families in England who will be pleased to hear that Lord Andros is dead," Admiral Reed said, moving to a side table to pour himself a finger of brandy, draining it quickly as he set the glass heavily on the table once more.

Gregory's eyes widened at the pseudonym for the pirate. "I feel I have heard the blackened name of Lord Andros before," Gregory admitted as he tried to remember where he'd heard the name before.

Admiral Reed shook his head as he thanked God that the man was now dead and would not live to tell the tale of what horrible deed he'd been pressured into doing. "I hope that soon every memory and person associated with the man will either be forgotten or lost," the admiral said as he approached Gregory and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "We've done England a great service today."

Gregory simply nodded his head, being lost in thought and wanting the solitude of his cabin to think about why he recognized that name.

“I agree, Admiral. Now if you’ll excuse me, I care to rest for a bit before dinner.” And with that, Gregory left the admiral, intent on remembering why that name meant something to him.

## Chapter 24

Maria's mind had been pulled from her novel when she heard the sounds of a man screaming. At first, she wondered if the prisoners below were being tortured. Then she realised that the screams were coming from above. A man sounded to be pleading for his life as he screamed and cried, the sound trailing along the ship's main deck before they faded away into an echo, as though drifting downwards. Maria barely heard the splash before all went silent. As Maria listened to the silence around her that rung like a bell, she wondered who had been thrown overboard and prayed that it hadn't been James.

A knock to her cabin door startled her, but Maria was quick to regain her composure as she set her novel aside. She stood and smoothed down her muslin gown before pushing back the strands of her hair behind her ears. She then opened the door, placing a small smile on her lips as she looked up into the eyes of an officer.

"Admiral Reed requests your presence, Miss Maria," the officer explained with a bow of his head.

"Certainly," Maria replied as she opened the door fully and allowed the officer to lead her along the ship. As they neared the admiral's room, the officer simply bowed to her again before leaving back down the ship. Maria was left then to knock on the door and enter once she'd been beckoned in.

"Good afternoon, Miss Maria. How are you faring?" Admiral Reed asked as he gestured to a chair. A small table and chairs had been arranged next to a tea cart nearby.

Maria smiled pleasantly as she took a seat and accepted the cup of tea that the admiral offered her. She couldn't help but smile when she smelled the sweet lavender aroma, one she'd missed dearly. "I am well, thank you, Admiral Reed. But I will say that my reading was interrupted by some dreadful screams," Maria said after she took a long sip of the tea and set it aside.

Admiral Reed grimaced as he shook his head. "Absolutely dreadful indeed, Miss Maria. I'm sorry to have disturbed you for I hate to cause you any more harm. But perhaps I could reassure you with the knowledge that the pirate Captain is now dead," the admiral explained. Maria was surprised to learn this and was equally relieved that it wasn't James who'd been thrown overboard.

"I presume that there was a good reason for this, though I am certainly grateful for the news and the service, Admiral. I will certainly sleep better at night knowing that man will never come for me," Maria admitted, trying to pacify the admiral after she'd asked her imposing question. She'd become so used to speaking her mind on the pirate ship, that she had to catch herself before saying such things in front of English gentlemen.

The admiral simply smiled at her as he nodded his head. "Indeed, there are many good reasons why that mongrel of a man deserved to die quickly," the admiral replied.

Maria couldn't argue with the admiral on that point, but there was a certain thought in her mind that she couldn't let go of. "Admiral, I was forced to dine with that pirate Captain on one occasion. It was a private affair, and he tried to force himself upon me afterwards," Maria admitted, wishing she didn't have to speak of the matter any longer. "During the dinner conversation, he did admit his exploits in London and the men he ruined in the gaming halls." The admiral's eyes grew large as he listened to Maria, worried what she'd say next

to confirm his fears.

“I want to reassure you that I’ll never speak of what he told me about you, Admiral, not even to my brother or my parents. The man is dead, after all, and won’t be able to disguise himself as a privateer ever again,” Maria said, locking eyes with the admiral as relief flooded his face. “But I will say this. For the rest of my life, I will hate you. It was you who forged those papers for him, giving him access to the ports. It is you who is responsible for the deaths of all those people and for my kidnapping. And I am certain that the weight of that guilt will be punishment enough.”

Admiral Reed covered his mouth as he looked away from Maria, knowing her words to be true. Though he’d been able to rid himself of the man that held so much blackmail over him, his death wouldn’t rid him of the guilt that he was plagued with daily.

“Please forgive me, Miss Maria. But you must understand that I had no other option. It was either do it or be ousted for losing all my fortune to a pirate,” the admiral explained, his eyes pleading as they focused on Maria once more.

“As a lady, I understand how title means everything in our world. But I hope this has all been a lesson enough to convince you to stay away from the gaming halls.” Maria stood then and curtsied to the admiral before leaving the room, not waiting to hear any more excuses from the pathetic man. She felt tears sting her eyes as she made her way back to her room, only allowing the tears to fall once she was safely away from prying eyes.

It was a relief to know that Captain Maidus was dead, and that she’d never have to fear the man coming for her. It was true that she would sleep better at night knowing that there was no possible way he could have survived being thrown overboard. However, she would always

carry with her the truth of the matter, that it was one poor choice that had led to the death of so many.

After the sobs had subsided, Maria decided that she needed rest. And laying down upon the bed, she prayed that soon this whole ordeal would be over with, and that somehow she'd be able to discover the truth about whether or not James still lived.

~\*~

That evening, Maria requested for a meal to be brought to her room. She didn't feel well and simply wanted to be alone. For a time, Gregory had kept her company, deciding to take a meal with her instead of at the table with the admiral. Though he wouldn't condemn the man for the order he gave, he simply didn't want to dine with him either. Instead, Gregory had focused on making Maria laugh, reminding her of funny stories from their childhood.

"I had completely forgotten about Mrs. Mathews," Maria said as her mirth subsided. It had been a long time since she'd laughed so. The last time had been with James, and the thought made her calm for a moment. She tried to keep her focus on Gregory, even though her thoughts often wandered.

"How could you have forgotten how horrible your first governess was?" Gregory reasoned as he continued to laugh. He noticed the way that Maria would often look far away, but he tried his best to keep her laughing. A smile returned to her lips as she looked at him again.

"Well, Mother did try to reason that she came with a good reference. Obviously, that reference had been a bit alleged," Maria said as they laughed about it again.

“Oh, how happy Mother and Father will be to see you again,” Gregory said as he looked fondly at his sister, never tiring of seeing her well.

“Do you really think Father will be happy to see me?” Maria asked, remembering their last conversation.

Gregory reached across the table and took Maria’s hand firmly in his. “Yes, dear sister. Our father has been worried sick since you were kidnapped. On more than one occasion he did comment how he wished that you two hadn’t parted after such harmful words. He truly wishes to make amends,” Gregory explained.

Maria nodded her head since she too wanted to make things better between her and her father. “I’ve felt the guilt of my words for a very long time, Gregory. I’m pleased to hear that Father is no longer angry with me,” Maria said.

“You’ll also be pleased to hear that Father sold his plantations to another gentleman and has decided instead to invest his wealth back into the Willcox estate. He wants to focus on his own lands instead of foreign ones. As soon as we arrive in London, we’ll be traveling home to the country,” Gregory said, watching Maria carefully. He felt relief as a wide smile crossed her face.

She squeezed Gregory’s hand in return, thrilled to hear the news. “Nothing could make me happier, Gregory. I wanted to speak to Father about moving back to the country so I could recover, so hearing that he already plans to do so fills me with joy,” Maria said, one of her hopes for the future coming to fruition. If her other plans failed, she’d want to be as far away from society as possible to recover her broken heart.

“Then I am happy as well,” Gregory said as he stood. “Now, let us retire for the evening. Though we certainly have little to occupy ourselves until our return to England, at least we can look forward to the future with happiness in our hearts.”

Gregory leaned down and kissed Maria on the head before he moved towards the door. Maria simply smiled at him as he left, wishing to reassure him that she felt the same way. But deep in her heart, Maria knew that she wouldn't feel true happiness again until she discovered whether or not James was still alive.

Maria sat and listened to the sounds around her, waiting for the best opportunity to leave the cabin room. She didn't want to raise Gregory's suspicions and so needed to wait and ensure he was asleep before she opened the door. She also wanted to make sure that as few as possible of the officers would still be awake before she began to put her plan into action. And so, Maria sat and read her novel until the late hours of the night came, her heart beating as she thought about what she was about to do.



## Chapter 25

A small clock in her cabin room chimed softly to the tune of midnight. It was only then that Maria rose from her chair and donned her shawl, securing it tightly against her head and shoulders. She moved quietly, trying to make as little sound as possible as she left her cabin room and traveled down the hallway to the stairs that led to the main deck.

It was dark, but the moonlight gave enough glow to allow Maria to travel safely along the main deck. She walked slowly, avoiding any of the officers that stood watch over the deck. No one paid her any attention or maybe didn't see her as she moved to the far side of the ship and opened the hatch that would lead her down into the belly of the ship.

Maria took the lantern that was hanging at the bottom of the stairs and began moving through the ship. Having spent the last two months at sea, she was rather familiar with the construction of a ship and didn't find it too difficult to locate another set of stairs that would lead her further down. It was easy to guess that at the very bottom would be the area that the prisoners were being kept.

The stench of blood and rot hit her first as she reached the bottom of the stairs. The entire bottom portion of the ship was filled with cells, allowing her to see through to every pirate that had been captured. At the other end of the ship she could see lantern light, and knew that there would be officers assigned to watch over the prisoners. Doing her best to lower the light of the lantern so she wouldn't be spotted right away, Maria began her search of James.

As Maria shined her light into the cells, the pirates shied away from

her, trying to block their faces from the light as though it was harmful. She stepped carefully, trying to avoid the filth on the floors the best she could. It was hard to tell the pirates apart because they all were covered in blood and dirt. Many of these pirates were injured and hadn't received proper care. A few would die before they returned to England, and even then, their fate was to hang at the gallows for their many crimes. Despite how gruesome the sight before her was, she couldn't give up until she could confirm whether or not James was amongst them.

As she walked carefully down the row of cells, her name being called pulled her attention down a bit further to a cell with only a single man inside. The man had stood as her lantern light had come near and he'd realised that she wasn't another guard. He smiled weakly at her as tears filled Maria's eyes when her lantern light caught his face.

Maria quickly set down her lantern before she plunged her arms through the bars, pulling James to her as he hung onto her the best he could in the cell. He kissed the parts of her face that he could reach, hating to dirty her face and beautiful gown, but not being able to resist a chance to feel her once more.

James felt so thin in her arms that she feared he hadn't been given any food or water. She didn't know if she could do anything for him, but right now she wanted to hold him as close to her body as the bars would allow. His smell was strong, but she didn't mind if it meant that she could be near him again.

"I feared that you might have died in the attack," James whispered between his kisses.

"I had feared the same," Maria replied as she kissed him soundly once more before leaning back so she could look into his eyes. Tears filled hers as she saw him this way, behind bars and beaten badly. She

wanted to demand that he be freed, but knew that no one would follow her demands.

James lightly traced her face with his thumb, fearing getting her dirty, but wanting to memorize every feature of her before it was too late. “I love you,” he whispered then, knowing he could not deny his feelings any longer. He also knew that his time on this earth would soon be over once the navy ship returned to England.

“I love you, too, James. Oh, so very much,” Maria replied as tears streaked down her face. “Oh James, whatever are we going to do?”

James held her as tightly as he could with the bar between them, wanting to bring her comfort while he had the chance. He feared that this would be the last time they’d see each other. He doubted that Maria had been given permission to see him, and it was likely that soon they would be caught.

“My dear Maria, I love the fierce strength you possess. I saw that fire in you the first moment I laid eyes on you, and I loved seeing it bloom within you as you never gave up, no matter what you faced. When Horus would order you about, you wouldn’t let him beat you down. You never showed signs of weakness no matter what Captain Maidus said to you or made you do. Even when he hit you, you simply looked at him with that gaze of yours that could kill men where they stand,” James said, whispering slowly in her ear.

Maria chuckled into her chest, relishing in his words as he told her everything he loved about her. “And that, Maria,” James said as he leaned back and looked into her eyes, “is something you must never let anyone take away from you. Always be fierce. I know that one day you’ll find the perfect match in life and marry someone that can really make you happy and offer you truly everything you need.”

Maria stared at James, confusion crossing her features as she looked at him. "But James, all I need is you," she whispered, refusing to give up. James wiped the tears from her ears, never wanting to forget her face, relishing in the way she smelled and felt in his arms.

James bent his head down then, capturing her lips the best he could with the bars in his way. He tasted her tongue with his, gripping onto her as he pulled her as close as he could. He wanted to take her into his bed once more, to feel her bare skin against his, and find that sweet release of pleasure that only she could help him feel.

James put every ounce of his soul into that kiss, knowing that it would be the last one he ever experienced with the woman he loved. Never before had he confessed his love for another, always guarding his heart against the want of companionship or the need to spend the rest of his life with another. But now, knowing that his life would soon be ending, and certain that he'd never see Maria again after this moment, he kissed her with a need unlike anything else. Every amount of passion he had left he gave to Maria in that kiss.

The sounds of heavy boots falling close by caused James to let go of Maria and push her back from him. He stepped several feet away from her, not wanting her to be caught kissing him. She stared at him with wide eyes, pleading with him to never let her go. But as the lantern light of the officers fell upon them, she knew that her time with James was over.

"Miss Maria, what on earth are you doing here?" an officer asked as Maria picked up her lantern and turned towards them.

"I couldn't sleep and wanted to make sure these filthy mongrels were still behind bars. It will bring me peace to know they can't hurt me

anymore,” Maria said, trying to regain her composure.

The officers pitied her as they led her back down the hallway to the stairs. “Don’t you worry, Miss Maria. We’ll make sure these pirates never see another sunrise, let alone have the opportunity to harm you. Come now, let’s get you back to bed where you belong.”

Maria allowed the men to guide her all the way back to her cabin. She thanked them several times and was always met with kindness. Once she was left alone once again in her cabin room, she crumpled to the floor as sobs overtook her. Her heart broke as she realised that she’d never get to see James again. There was no way she could risk going down to him again without her true intentions being discovered. If Gregory found out that she’d fallen in love with a pirate, she feared losing him if she ever told him the truth.

Maria fought hard against her raging emotions as oceans of pain crashed around her, causing her to gasp for air as she clutched her heart. The thought of never being able to kiss James again haunted her, pulling her deeper into her despair. It was the thought of never being able to see him again that finally caused the pain to overtake her body, pulling her down into the depths of unconsciousness. Even then, as she slept, tears continued to stream from her eyes.

~\*~

Sometime in the night, Maria had awoken from her spot on the floor, feeling stiff and sore as she rose and finally made it to bed. She didn’t bother undressing as she simply lay on top of the covers, her eyes looking around the room as sunlight started to rise over the horizon and bring light to the world once more.

With each new morning, the navy ship came closer to arriving back in England. To those on board, it was a welcoming sign to see a new morning. For her, it was the gut-wrenching reality that soon her true love would be tried and hung for his crimes. If she tried to convince the court that it was only James' nature and that he didn't act out of malice or hatred, would they believe her? Could she really testify that James should be released?

Maria sighed deeply as she shut her eyes and tried to push out all thoughts. She knew that no one would believe her and perhaps even convict her of insanity caused by being out at sea for so many months. Once she returned to England, she'd have a whole new game of survival to play. One which would force her to pretend and act pretty in front of society's eyes. Maria would continue to act innocently and gain the trust of many, but in the back of her mind, she'd always be looking for a way to escape.

Tears came afresh to her eyes as she rolled onto her side and held a pillow to her chest, wishing it was James she was clinging to. She didn't know how she was going to live her life without him, or even survive the next few weeks until his trial and ultimate death, but survive she must if she was ever going to find peace with herself again. But for now, in this early morning, Maria allowed herself to cry and feel miserable.

## Chapter 26

Gregory had become truly worried about Maria the past few days at sea. Though she was present at every meal and smiled politely to the admiral and his officers, she ate very little. When a meal wasn't being had, Maria stayed to her cabin, rarely coming out and only then for necessities. Gregory tried to have her walk with him along the main deck for some fresh air and beautiful views, but she always denied him, explaining she needed to rest or declaring that she simply needed to be alone.

The night England's shores came into view, excitement ran through the crew like a bolt of lightning. Everyone was excited to disembark the ship and be on solid ground again. Gregory was thrilled to be able to return Maria home to her family and soon be back in the country where they grew up. He wished that a change of scenery would brighten Maria's mood. But as Gregory went to announce their arrival to England, he watched her simply nod in response, with no excitement at all.

Gregory sat on the edge of Maria's bed where she lay resting. She'd dressed at least and had pinned back her hair, but she lay still and unmoving as though she'd been sleeping again. Gregory lightly rested his hand on her shoulder, wishing he could take out everything that was paining Maria.

"Dear sister, why don't you tell me about it? What has you so melancholy that even the knowledge of being able to see our parents again in the morning doesn't bring life back into you?" Gregory said softly. He hadn't wanted to press his sister, but his concerns for her health and well-being had begun to bother him dearly.

“Gregory, it is hard to put into words the pain that courses through my body. I know we will return to England, and I will be under society’s eyes. There is a sort of pressure that is placed upon me as a young lady that I had been free of for many weeks. I’m sure in time I will return to the way of things and the culture of England, and though I am glad to be returning home and to see my parents again, it will simply take time for me to recover from all of this,” Maria said softly. She’d turned to look into her brother’s eyes, pleading for him to simply take her words as truth. She didn’t dare describe how her heart was breaking, that the best of her would probably die with her lover. That she’d never feel joy and happiness again because the man she loved most in the world was about to be hung. No, there was no way she could describe this to him in a way that he’d understand and forgive her of. This was a pain she’d have to conquer and bury deep down inside her.

“I suppose I can understand that, in a manner of speaking. As I am not a young lady, there are things I will never understand,” Gregory said with a chuckle, causing Maria to smile.

“Yes, you’ll never understand what it’s like to wear a corset for an entire evening, being expected to dance and dine with that damn thing on as you try to breathe and talk at the same time,” Maria said, giggles starting to erupt.

“Indeed, sister, I will certainly never have to experience that. Or have to eat dainty bites of food or always wear the proper shoes and gowns for morning, afternoon, and evening time,” Gregory mocked in a flowery voice, imitating a young lady.

Maria was laughing hard now as she turned fully towards her brother and sat up. “And you have no idea how bothersome it is for Father to introduce me to every eligible gentleman in the room, regardless of age, appearance, or characteristics. Could you imagine me marrying a man twice my age simply because he has a large fortune?” Maria said



as they continued to laugh together.

When their mirth subsided, they simply looked at each other. As the pain began to wind back into Maria's heart, she tried hard to push it back, at least when she was around her family. She knew she needed to be strong now, or else everyone would find out the truth. And if Maria knew how to do one thing right, it was how to be strong when most people couldn't.

"It is good to hear you laugh again, Maria. I am terribly worried about you and certainly had no idea you felt so much pressure returning to England," Gregory admitted as he took Maria's hand and held it softly in his.

"It is not that of a man to know the inner worries and fears of a woman," Maria said simply, knowing that she couldn't fault her brother. Surely not, since he didn't know the whole truth.

"I suppose not," Gregory said with a chuckle. "But we shall retire quickly to the country, as soon as you're fit for the journey. There will be no society's eyes there and you'll be free to act as you please."

"You are very kind, Gregory. I will then look forward to the next part of our journey and envision our country estate. Before long it will be the holidays and snow will surely fall. There is plenty to look forward to," Maria said, trying to appear more positive in front of Gregory even though her words were laced with a lie.

"Indeed. Now, I'll leave you till morning. I would rise early if I were you since the ship is expected to finish docking by first light," Gregory said as he rose from the bed.

“Of course. I’m sure everyone will be eager to see us,” Maria said with a soft smile. She tried to muster up her excitement for seeing her parents again and did her best to smile sincerely at Gregory.

“So much so that I’d wager our mother will cause a scene at the ports,” Gregory said with a final laugh before leaving Maria alone.

The moment the door was shut, Maria’s mask fell and she allowed the pain to take over her once more. It was hard to keep it at bay, but it was good practice for when she’d be under her parents’ eye continuously. Maria forced herself to ready for bed, to prepare her gown for the morning, and ensure that all her things were packed for when they’d depart from the ship. It was this busy work that allowed her mind to keep from being distracted from her painful thoughts. But as she climbed into bed, she knew that sleep wouldn’t come easy to her. All she could think about was James, knowing that tonight was the last night that she could possibly sneak below and see him one last time.

“But what good would that do?” Maria asked herself as she forced herself to lie down and close her eyes. Seeing James again would only cause the pain to be renewed, and it would possibly be even more hurtful to leave him again. No, the best thing she could do was forget that James had ever existed, that her love for him had never been. The sooner she forgot, perhaps the sooner her pain would go away. But as sleep came for her, Maria knew that she was only lying to herself. And that wasn’t a smart thing to do when you could only trust yourself.

~\*~

“Get some sleep, gents, because in the morning you’ll get to see the insides of your new home in London, England,” an officer called over

the prisoners late that night, causing the other officers to laugh and sneer at them. It had been an unpleasant experience having to guard such filthy creatures, the stench and rot filling their nostrils every time they had to come below deck. Soon they'd be home and done with this mission, which greatly excited the officers.

For James, it meant that soon his misery would be over. He'd spent his days thinking of Maria and his nights dreaming of her. Sometimes he'd wrapped his arms around his body, imagining what it would be like to hold Maria in his arms again. He tried to send out messages of his love into the night, praying she felt his love for her until the moment he'd be hanged. Somehow, somehow, he wanted Maria to know that he'd always love her and would carry that love into the next life.

James was done crying, done trying to figure out a way to see her again. He didn't participate in the discussions at night amongst the other pirates who still tried to think of a way to escape. Once news reached his ears that Captain Maidus had been thrown overboard, he knew that there was little hope that their leader could come up with a plan to help them escape. As James' eyes roamed over the men he'd considered family for so long, his heart ached for them too, knowing that they'd all face the same fate soon.

It was hard to distinguish the crew members anymore since they were all covered in filth, blood, and dirt. Somewhere around him, James knew that Leonardo was still with them. He'd heard Jenkins' angry voice ring out at one point, causing the guard to silence him quickly. Someone had said that Louis had died upon their ship and James was at least thankful that the lame man had received a swift death and hadn't been made to suffer like the rest of them. Towering above the rest of them was Geoffrey, always sitting stoic as though he could destroy the guards with his stare alone, but without his swords, he was just a man. He was also one of the few who still talked of escaping.

“When they come for us in the morning, we could overtake them. They think we are weak, but we are pirates. We could take them with our bare hands,” James could hear him say from a few cells down.

“And how you suppose we do that chained?” another responded, dismay in his voice.

“I’ll pummel a guard to death and get the keys,” Geoffrey replied with distinction.

“And what happens when they just shoot us?” someone spoke up, scoffing at the plan.

“We kill them before they can fire a single weapon,” Geoffrey said as though it was plain and simple to understand. For him, brute strength always won. For the rest of the pirates, they needed their swords.

“And let’s say that we overthrow the guards, kill everyone on board, and take control of the ship. How then do you expect to outrun every ship in London’s harbor, sail back down the river to open waters, flee the entire side of England through the channel and make it to the ocean? No matter what we do, we end up dead,” Leonardo called out above them all, causing the guards to scurry his way. But he slunk back against the wall, putting his head down so as to be avoided. The guards didn’t bother with him, knowing that soon they’d be rid of these pests.

There was no discussion after the guards left and Leonardo’s words sunk into their minds. James could hear a few crying, their sniffles ringing out every once and a while. Perhaps none of them really thought they would ever be caught or that Captain Maidus would ever lead them astray. When the Captain had described his plan to attack

Portsmouth to them, they'd all been excited, especially when the Captain showed them his official papers. It all seemed too easy, that they would just land, steal, and leave again.

Perhaps it was his foolish idea to kidnap Maria that had led them all to this point. He'd kidnapped plenty of men and women in the past so it never occurred to him that this one instance would lead to their demise. James considered this for a while, wondering if it was he that was to blame after all. But as James thought of Maria and the love they'd been able to share for a short time, he knew in his heart that he'd always choose her no matter how many times he was given the chance to make a different choice. His love for her was strong and would be the last thing he thought of as his executioner put the rope around his neck.

## Chapter 27

Anxiety ran through Maria like a wild current as she held tightly to Gregory's arm. The planks to the docks were being lowered and she knew that at any minute, her parents would come into view. She'd worn the nicest gown that had been in her trunk, hoping to still appear as proper as she could be. In her other hand, she held a parasol above her head as though she could shield her skin from any more sunlight. At least her hands were gloved in lace and very little of her skin was exposed as she wore a high collared gown that had ruffles up her neck. And with her golden hair hanging in curls around her face, she felt hidden enough.

"Miss Maria, it's been a pleasure to make your acquaintance these last few weeks. I pray dearly that your future is bright, and that the rest of your days are filled with happiness. I wish the best for you and your family," Admiral Reed said as he approached the two, giving them a deep bow as he said his words.

Maria dipped her head in return as she placed a smile on her lips. "Thank you, Admiral Reed. I'll always be grateful for your rescue," Maria replied, giving the admiral a pointed look. He certainly couldn't believe her words, but at least she was being kind to him in public.

The moment the planks were lowered, Gregory said his goodbyes before leading his sister slowly down the planks. At the bottom, they reached the docks that would lead up to the streets above. They walked slowly in the early morning, their eyes searching for their parents as they wound their way through the docks, through those mingling about as they either unloaded or began to load other ships that were docked. Maria refused to look back to see if the pirates were being unloaded as well, and to see if she could get one more glance of James. But she continued to look ahead of her and try to forget the

pain that plagued her heart.

“Maria! Gregory! Oh, I see them, Lord Willcox!” a female shouted from above. Maria looked up to see Charlotte’s shining face, as though she was a beacon in a sea of darkness. Maria smiled at her as Gregory led her up the stone stairs to the street. Their parents came into view next and Maria noticed the paleness in her mother’s face. She remembered Gregory’s words and was at least pleased to see her out and walking.

The moment Maria stepped onto the street she was enveloped by her parents. Gregory was kind enough to take her parasol as her father kissed her soundly on the forehead and her mother squeezed her tightly, sobs escaping her mouth.

“Shh now, Mother. I am well and looking forward to returning home with you,” Maria said, trying to calm her mother. It wouldn’t be long before they would start to gather onlookers, and even here at the ports, word could travel swiftly into town and along the streets of the prestigious. Maria already feared the tarnish to her family’s name with her kidnapping and only hoped that society had pitied them instead of turning their noses up at her parents.

“Indeed, dear. Let’s get the children home and have them settled. They must be exhausted,” Lord Willcox said, giving Maria space again. “But words can’t describe how happy we are to see you, my dear.”

Maria looked up into her father’s eyes and saw pools of tears. She couldn’t help herself as she embraced her father again, tears streaming down her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Father, for those awful words I said,” Maria sobbed as she clung onto him. Lord Willcox returned her embrace, hugging her tightly to her chest, never wanting to be apart from her again.

“Now, now, all is forgiven, my dear Maria. I still love you,” Lord Willcox said, causing Maria to cry even harder as she stammered out her own declaration of affection towards her father. After a moment more, he led his daughter and wife to the waiting carriage, and Gregory was kind enough to escort Lady Morgan along with them.

There was all manner of chattering going on as Lady Willcox and Lady Morgan fussed over Maria. Gregory loved the way Maria smiled as the two women assured Maria that she was gorgeous, even with her tanned skin.

“It gives you an exotic flare,” Lady Morgan assured, squeezing Maria’s hand.

“And it will fade by next Season,” Lady Willcox added, pleased beyond words to see her daughter again. She had to continually dab her eyes as she cried happy tears, all her fears and worries fleeing before her eyes as she could gaze upon her daughter once more.

Maria didn’t want to displease her mother by stating she didn’t want to attend next Season, but for now was simply pleased to be moving further and further away from the ports and out of sight of any ships. She mostly tried not to think of James and what he must be going through right now as he was thrown into prison.

“I’m sure Lord Crawford is looking forward to seeing you,” Lady Morgan said, bring Maria’s focus back to reality. Charlotte gave her a meaningful smile, and Maria did her best to look pleasant.

“I look forward to thanking him for his assistance which resulted in



my rescue. I'm sure if it hadn't been for his uncle's connections that this day wouldn't have happened," Maria said, doing her best to speak honest words. But the chatter in the carriage seemed to die down as they realised just how fortunate they were that Maria had been rescued, and what could have happened to her if she hadn't.

Noticing how the air in the carriage had changed, Lord Willcox spoke up, saying, "In a few days, once you've rested, Maria, we plan to retire to our country estate. I hope that settles well with you."

Maria smiled at her father, thankful for his kindness. "Indeed, Father, I would very much like to journey to the country for a time. I know I've been away for a long time, but I'm not ready to return to society just yet. I want time... to heal from this." Maria did her best not to let her emotions get the best of her. While they all thought Maria was referring to the gruesome experience of living upon a pirate's ship, she was instead speaking of her broken heart. Regardless, they all felt for Maria and extended their pity.

"Of course, my dear. We shall live a quiet life in the country and enjoy the holidays together as a family. We won't even speak of Town until the Spring," Lady Willcox assured, bringing smiles back to Maria's face. It was her parents' kindness that truly allowed her to feel their love for her.

"And Lord Morgan and I shall come to pay you a visit as well," Charlotte assured as she squeezed her friend's hand once more.

Maria paid little attention to the scenery around her, feeling the sway of the carriage and realising how much different it felt than being aboard a ship. When the carriage reached their townhouse, Lord Willcox stepped down and extended his hand to Maria, helping her slowly step down from the carriage. Then, she slowly made her way up to the front door, feeling a bit off-balance. Before too long Gregory

was by her side, helping her up the stairs to the door as it was opened for them.

“My goodness, Miss Maria. How lovely it is to see you home,” Mr. Thatcher said in greeting as he bowed before her.

“Thank you, Mr. Thatcher. It’s good to be home,” Maria replied as she stepped into the townhouse, marveling at its beauty as though she was seeing it for the first time. She ran her fingers along the handrails of the stairs, feeling their smoothness below her fingers. She stepped idly down the hallway to the sitting room, her fingers touching trinkets that her mother always set out. At one point, Maria turned and noticed the curious way in which her family watched her.

“It’s like being in a dream,” she said as she let her hands fall down to her sides. “I simply never hoped to ever be here again.” She turned her head away from them as tears took over her. She was truly happy to be home, knowing that her future was secure once more with her family.

She felt her father’s strong hands rest on her shoulders as he tried to soothe her. “You don’t need to say anymore, Maria. You never have to talk about it again or explain your actions. We understand, dear one. We just want you to feel at ease here,” Lord Willcox said as his daughter sobbed. He couldn’t imagine what she’d endured and didn’t want to think about it anymore. He’d never question his daughter about it in fear of causing her more harm, and he vowed to do everything in his power to ensure her happy future.

“Come, Maria. I’ll take you to your room and help you get cleaned up. I’m sure Mrs. Bath can bring us up something to eat and I’ll have the bath drawn for you and everything,” Lady Willcox said, taking her daughter’s hand in hers.

Maria only nodded, allowing her mother to lead her like a child. It gave her comfort to be close to her mother again, and Lady Willcox felt more alive than she had in weeks having her daughter home and being able to take care of her once more. All that Maria could do was nod kindly to Gregory and Charlotte as she was led up the stairs. She felt awfully tired all of a sudden as she clung to the stairwell, needing the support to keep her balance.

She was thankful for her mother guiding her as they walked slowly down the carpeted hallway. Mrs. Bath met them upstairs as she opened Maria's bedchamber door for her, all the familiar things in her life seeming to come to greet her.

"It feels good to be home," Maria commented as her mother guided her to a chair. She sat heavily in the plush wing backed chair as her mother came to join her in a chair next to her. Maria let her gaze wander around the room. She wondered for a while if all of this could be real, that she indeed was home and not trapped on a pirate's ship. She took several deep breaths as Mrs. Bath fussed around the room, her chest from the ship seeming to appear as a maid came in to assist in putting away her things.

Maria was looked after by her mother as they sat and talked of idle things, of the weather and the different fashions her mother had spotted since they'd moved to town from Portsmouth. Maria simply listened, enjoying her mother's company. After a while, a tea tray was brought into the room and Maria was able to enjoy her favorite tea once more and a few sandwiches that Cook had prepared for them. After a while, a bath was brought in and Maria was assisted in bathing, something she'd grown up with, but without having experienced having a lady's maid in weeks, Maria almost felt shy. Would they be able to tell that she wasn't an innocent anymore? Maria scolded herself for having such silly thoughts and instead allowed her hair to be washed and her body scrubbed clean.

After the bath and having been dressed in a new gown her mother had recently bought for her, Maria felt better than she had in weeks. She had every intention of returning downstairs with her mother to visit with her family and friend in the drawing room, but as she stood to leave the room, a strong dizziness overtook her, causing her to crumple back into her chair. Maria pressed her hand to her forehead as she waited for the dizziness to settle.

Lady Willcox came to her side as she began to rub her back. "I think I should have Mr. Thatcher go fetch the physician. You've been through an awful lot and perhaps should just rest," she said as she helped Maria to her feet and towards her bed.

"I feel foolish for resting when I've only just dressed in this beautiful gown you purchased for me," Maria said with a chuckle as she allowed her mother to help her into bed.

"Now now, don't fuss over such little things. I'd be happy to purchase as many new gowns as you desired, Maria. You simply rest upon these pillows and I'll have the physician come to check on you. And if you desire company, then I'm sure we can simply come upstairs to sit with you," Lady Willcox reassured as she stroked her daughter's hair, doing her best to keep her emotions in check.

Maria smiled at her mother as her eyelids began to feel heavy. "I think I'll just rest for a bit. I'm sure all I need is some sleep," Maria said as she covered her mouth with the back of her hand as she yawned. Lady Willcox chuckled as she settled into a chair beside the bed, holding her daughter's hand in her own. A few tears slipped down her cheek as she watched her daughter fall asleep, praying silently her words of thanks that her daughter had been returned safely to her.

After a while, Lady Willcox rose and summoned Mr. Thatcher to call

upon the physician. When Lord Willcox came up to the room to inquire as to why the physician had been summoned, Lady Willcox explained Maria's dizzy spell and how she was sleeping now. Lord Willcox peeked into Maria's room, pleased to see her resting so well.

"I did not think she would look this good," Lord Willcox whispered as he gazed lovingly at his daughter. "I had simply feared the worst, it seems."

"Worry not, my dear. I did think the same, that she would come back to us in some wild state. But despite the colouring of her skin, she seems to have survived the ordeal with her dignity still intact," Lady Willcox commented, pleased with the way things were going so far.

"Maria has always been strong in nature," Lord Willcox said as he turned from the room. "Do let me know when she wakes." He departed then and made his way back downstairs to let his guests know that Maria was resting.

Lady Willcox returned to her daughter's side, determined to never let her out of her sight again.

## Chapter 28

Maria could hardly believe it. It was like she'd never been kidnapped as she sat at the dinner table, laughing with the other dinner guests as Gregory told a humorous story. It was simply another party her mother had organized with her closest friends. Charlotte had been accompanied by her husband, who'd come to Town to escort her back to their country estate. They reassured Maria they'd come to visit with her often once they too were settled.

Lord Crawford was in attendance that night as well. Though the man had come to pay Maria and her family a visit time and again, tonight he seemed rather odd to Maria. He'd requested to sit next to her during dinner, annoying Maria since she enjoyed sitting next to her brother, but she'd agreed simply because she owed Lord Crawford a great deal. She'd thanked the man on many occasions, but never encouraged him in the slightest because she couldn't think of being courted by a man when her heart still belonged to another. But this evening, Lord Crawford was paying her a particular interest.

"This chateaubriand steak is divine, wouldn't you say, Miss Maria," Lord Crawford said, drawing Maria's attention back to him once more.

"Indeed, Lord Crawford. Our cook has always made wonderful dishes," Maria agreed, trying to focus back on her brother as he started speaking of another story.

"Certainly better than anything you experienced upon the pirate's ship," Lord Crawford said in a soft tone, a chuckle following.

It always irritated her whenever Lord Crawford brought up her dreadful experience. She wasn't sure if he did so to make light of the situation or to poke fun at her. But either way, it always upset her no end. She feared that her breaking point was drawing near.

After dinner, Lord Crawford asked Maria to accompany him for a walk through the gardens. Maria was surprised by this invitation, but when she looked to her father he simply nodded his head eagerly, appearing to know what was about to happen next. Maria sighed as she took Lord Crawford's waiting arm and allowed the man to lead her outside the doors that led to the gardens.

The sun was setting, allowing there to be plenty of light to lead the way. Maria felt uncomfortable, remembering the last time she'd been on the arm of Lord Crawford, and the dreadful thing that had come of that. But Maria did her best to enjoy the walk, to view the last of the garden's blooms since the fall season would soon be upon them. Before too long, it would be chilly and windy until spring came again.

"I must say, Miss Maria, that you are radiant this evening," Lord Crawford said, breaking the silence between them. He'd led them a short distance from the house, but close enough that Maria could look over her shoulder and see the door leading back to the sitting room.

"Thank you, Lord Crawford. I must admit that my mother has been rather doting since my return," Maria said as she let go of the man's arm and took several steps away from him, pretending to be interested in a bloom. She traced her fingers around the petals, remembering the small flower James had brought to her.

"She has every right to be," Lord Crawford said, closing the space between them and clasping his hand with hers. "I must say, Maria, that I've dreamed of this moment for so long. I knew in my heart that

I would see you again and finally get to express my deepest feelings for you. I've loved you for so long that my heart will burst if I don't at least tell you and ask for your hand in marriage."

Maria stared up into his brown eyes, knowing that this man had probably been sought after by every eager young lady wanting to be the wife of an Earl. In society's eyes, they would be a perfect match. It made sense for a rescued woman to marry the man who'd orchestrated her rescue. But as she looked deeply into his eyes, she couldn't agree to marry such a man when she knew the truth about him.

Maria stepped back then, removing her hand from his. "While I was trapped aboard the pirate's ship, a fact you keep reminding me," Maria said pointedly as her anger rose, "I had the chance to speak with a Lord Andros."

The moment she said the name, she could see the fear that leaped into Lord Crawford's eyes as they grew large in surprise.

"How is that possible?" he stammered in response.

"Because Lord Andros was really Captain Maidus, leader of the pirates, who kidnapped me and forced me to work upon the ship," Maria explained, crossing her hands in front of her to help control her emotions. "Captain Maidus explained how he was able to get official papers to appear as a privateer, and how he swindled gentlemen at the gaming halls. He also detailed how he was able to take everything from you, Lord Crawford."

"That doesn't matter now. The man is dead and I'll soon have my fortune returned to me. It's only a matter of time before I get things



figured out and I'll have access to my money again," Lord Crawford said quickly, trying to appease Maria.

"And, pray tell, how much of your fortune is left after your visit to the gaming halls? Surely you must frequent them often if you were so desperate to sign your title away. No, I could never be with a man such as yourself, parading around town being someone you're not. Why would I want to marry a man who no doubt is hounded by debt collectors? Who would be so quick to spend my money as you have yours?"

Lord Crawford struck Maria, wanting to do something, anything, to silence her and the truths she was speaking. Maria stumbled to the ground, landing roughly against the dirt. But she wouldn't allow him to see her as weak as she quickly pushed herself back up to her feet, dismayed that her gown was now ruined.

"You're despicable, Fitzwilliam. Now get out of here before I tell every paper from England to Spain about your evil deeds. If I or any of my family ever sees you again, I assure you that you won't live very long." Maria's voice was stern, and by the way she glared at him, fear coursed through Lord Crawford as he staggered back. He almost tripped and fell as he ran around to the front of the house, quick to collect his horse and take off down the street.

Maria watched him go, running like a coward should. She was proud of herself for standing up to Lord Crawford, even after he'd struck her. But she'd promised James that she'd never let anyone take her fierceness from her. She knew that James would have been proud of her if he'd been here today to see her stand up to such a fool. Thinking about her love brought tears to her eyes, but she did her best to wipe them away as she heard footsteps nearing.

"What has happened?" Lord Willcox asked as he looked at the soiled

gown Maria wore. His eyes were filled with concern as he looked around for Lord Crawford.

“There is much I must tell you, Father,” Maria said as she gestured towards a bench.

“Are you hurt, child?” he asked as he sat with his daughter, placing a hand on her chin to turn her face towards him. He could tell that a bruise was forming as rage quickly filled him. “I’ll kill him.”

“No, Father. The man has probably already ridden straight out of London by now,” Maria said as she moved her face from her father’s hand. Maria then took the time to explain everything to her father, detailing everything Captain Maidus had shared with her in efforts to scare her, even telling him of what Admiral Reed had done. When she explained how Lord Crawford was actually a penniless man, only after her dowry, she watched her father’s fists clench.

“There is so much wrong that has been done against you, my dear, that I can hardly contemplate what I want to do without having this need to kill so many,” Lord Willcox confessed as he shut his eyes tight, tears burning his eyes.

“Please, Father. Let us put this all behind us. The pirate Captain is dead, Admiral Reed knows that I know his secret and wouldn’t dare do something like this again, and I suppose that Lord Crawford now feels the same. With this knowledge, I could ruin so many, but I don’t want to do that, Father, and neither should you,” Maria said, turning her father’s face towards hers, even wiping a few tears away.

“You’re right, Maria. You’ve always been so bright,” Lord Willcox said as he chuckled a little. Taking a deep breath, he rose and pulled Maria

to her feet. "Come now. I'm sure you're ready to retire for the night and I must return to our dinner guests. I will speak to your mother and Gregory after everyone has gone, but I'll think of an excuse so you can go on to bed."

"Thank you, Father," Maria said as she walked with her father for a bit. Then they parted ways, allowing him to return to the sitting room as she walked around the house to another door leading in. But as she placed her hand on the handle, she turned and looked back up at the stairs, wondering if her love still lived.

"I'll always love you, James," Maria whispered to the wind before heading inside and seeking refuge from the world.

~\*~

James was becoming dizzyier with each passing day. He recognized the sensation as land sickness from disembarking a ship after being out at sea for so long. But it felt worse this time. Perhaps it was his current filthy condition or the fact that he hadn't been fed in days.

The prison was dark where they were being kept, but in the distance, James could hear the sounds of the town. He often wondered how Maria was faring, and if she'd returned to her previous life of dinner parties and balls. When James couldn't keep his eyes open any longer as the dizziness overtook him, forcing him to lay flat against the dirty stones of his cell, James would focus on Maria's words and picture in his mind that Maria was happy living the life she'd detailed to him before.

To the guards that walked by James' cell, they were certain he'd gone insane as he lay on the ground, mumbling words they couldn't

understand. Even his fellow pirates had started to ignore him, knowing that James was no longer any use to them. Without a ship and a mission to complete, James was left with no purpose in life. Even if he did find a way out of this mess, there was no way that Maria's family would ever accept him. After all, it was he who had kidnapped Maria in the first place.

James didn't move when his cell door was opened. He figured the time had come for him to be brought before the English courts and judged for his many crimes. Though he didn't consider his deeds to be crimes, he knew that his opinion wouldn't matter here in England. When he thought of how he'd be treated in Tripoli, he knew they would consider him brave and honorable. But he didn't like to think much of home. It saddened him more to think that he'd never see his family again.

"Show me his legs," a man commanded, causing the guards to move with a swiftness, not wanting to displease the gentleman, but also not wanting to be in the cell longer than needs be.

James didn't protest or bother moving as the guards pulled up cuffs of his trousers until his entire legs were showing. It didn't mean anything to him, and with the dizziness plaguing his mind, he didn't dare move more than he needed or else he'd lose control of what little he had in his stomach. But when he heard the man who'd given the command gasp, James slowly opened his eyes to see what the matter was.

He first looked down at his legs, not noticing any difference. The burn scars that tattooed his left leg had been there for as long as he could remember, and he thought nothing of them. But as he looked up at the older man's face, who had his eyes glued to his left leg, he wondered why burn scars would interest this man so. And when the man looked James in the eyes, a shiver ran through James as he looked into dark green eyes that resembled his own so well.

The gentleman stepped into the cell then and kneeled next to James. “Be careful, my lord. You never know what a prisoner will do once they’ve gone insane,” the guard warned. James noticed the fashionable suit the man wore, his boots alone reflecting the dim light of the prison, they were shined so well. James could tell this man possessed great wealth and must be from a prestigious family if the guards referred to him as ‘my lord’.

“What is your name?” the gentleman asked as he neared James.

“My name is James Ihram. My mother is Tanya Ihram. I come from Tripoli,” James introduced, knowing that his identity meant nothing to him anymore. It felt almost relieving not needing to lie anymore. With death looming over him, he didn’t need to be strong anymore. He only needed to keep breathing until he wasn’t allowed to do that either.

The gentleman, however, stared at James in wonder, even reaching out a hand to brush back his long hair and stare into his face. James even noticed tears in his eyes as the man peered at him.

“I want this man bathed, clothed, and fed,” the gentleman commanded as he continued to stare at James.

The guards were shocked as they looked between each other. “But, my lord, the man is a pirate. Certainly you could have no interest in him,” the guards reasoned, wondering if the Duke had gone as insane as the prisoner.

“This man is not a pirate, but my son,” the Duke replied as he looked to the guards and glared at them. The guards were quick to act,

unchaining James as one helped him sit up. They were quick to bring him food and water, which James quickly ate, draining the water just as quickly.

“I don’t understand,” James said after he’d been fed, the dizziness starting to subside.

“I promise all will be explained in time, my boy. For now, I must leave you. But I’ll come for you when the time is right,” the man said as he stood and prepared to leave the cell.

“At least tell me your name,” James called as he began to roll down his trousers, not liking the way his legs had been exposed for the world to see.

“My name is Lord James Lucas, Duke of Kemberly. Your mother, Tanya, was once my wife,” the Duke explained as he stepped outside the cell as the guards came to collect James to bath him. James could only look at the Duke with wide eyes full of tears. Could it be possible that his father still lived? James didn’t know what to think as the guards pulled him to his feet and led him from the cell. It was all James could do to stay conscious as the guards led him away.

## Chapter 29

Even out in the country, Maria had learned of the day the trial would be held. She'd inquired it of her father one day, saying that the nightmares were starting to plague her again despite the tonic the physician had given her for such things. Maria had explained how she wanted some surety that the pirates had been put to death so she could sleep easier at night. Therefore, Lord Willcox had sent a letter to London's magistrate for the details of the date of the trial, and the day the pirates would be hung. After her father had relayed the dates to her, Maria had put them to memory, thanking her father for his efforts. And now, as the day of the trial came to be, Maria asked her mother if she minded that Maria take a walk, alone.

"But, my dear, you shouldn't be walking in the country alone. Why don't you have your brother escort you to the village and back? That should be exercise enough," Lady Willcox suggested, not liking the idea of Maria ever being alone. After all, even though they now resided in the country, that didn't mean they were free from any possible danger. There were still robbers and rogues that plagued the country roads as well.

"I will simply walk down to Miss Julia's for a morning visit and be back in time for dinner. Gregory would certainly not want to join me for that visit," Maria lied, needing to convince her mother.

Lady Willcox cringed at the thought of Miss Julia. It was no secret that the young lady pined after her son, and Lady Willcox did not have high regard for the very plain girl. "Indeed," Lady Willcox agreed. "Gregory would not enjoy that one bit. You are so kind to make friends with such a plain young lady. She certainly benefits from your friendship."

"I feel the same way," Maria said as she rose from her chair in the sitting room. "I'm going to go change for the walk and perhaps pick some flowers along the way to take to Miss Julia."

"Just please be careful, my dear," Lady Willcox warned as she watched her daughter leave the room. It didn't settle well with her that Maria would be out by herself, but she also knew that she couldn't keep her daughter cooped up in the house all the time. A short walk was bound to give her daughter the exercise she needed. And perhaps the visit with Miss Julia would cheer her up. Though Maria often appeared pleasant and cheerful, Lady Willcox knew her daughter. She knew that something great still bothered her daughter dearly. Until Maria spoke a word of it, they would never know.

Maria was quick to change into her walking gown and boots with the assistances of her lady in waiting. After having a small picnic basket packed for her by the cook, Maria set off down the lane that would lead her to Miss Julia's. But once another path came to the lane, she took it instead, seeking solitude for the day.

In her pocket, Maria carried her smelling salts with her and a few extra handkerchiefs. She'd expected to cry the entire day, and not wanting to be bothered by anyone in the event she was overcome with her sobs, Maria put her mind to a secluded grove of trees that surrounded a small pond. But once Maria settled into the spot she'd thought of for days, a place where she could hide away from the world without being bothered, Maria found that she could not cry.

No matter how many times she thought of James, remembering his lips on hers or the way he held her tight as he made love to her, Maria couldn't cry. It was as though she had spent all her tears already over her love and could no longer conjure them forth to help ease the pain in her heart. So instead, the pain felt tight in her chest.



She held her hand over her heart as she began to talk aloud. “James, I don’t know what to do. I know you said that you wanted me to find someone who I could one day marry, who would treat me well and never take away my fierceness. But how could I ever forget you? How could I ever love someone the way I loved you?” Maria said, the wind blowing lazily by. Normally, today would have been the perfect day for a picnic. The weather was warm but not hot. The sun was bright, but often shaded by a passing cloud. The water in front of her reflected the sun, glistening as though it was a beacon of hope and light. But as she stared into the water, all she could do was feel this pain.

“I know that someday soon, you’ll be dead. I know that I’ll never see you again or be able to hold you in my arms. I miss you, James. I love you and wish every day that I could be with you... even when I know it’s impossible, I still wish for it,” Maria said, her heart starting to pound against her chest. She withdrew the smelling salts from her pocket, taking a quick whiff to settle her nerves. She didn’t like the way the pain built up in her chest and wondered if being so far from the house had been a good idea.

“James, I will always long for you. Till the day I die and get to join you in the next life, I will love you. Every day I will find a way to remember you and the short time we were able to spend together. Perhaps one day I will marry, but it won’t be for love. More than likely it will simply to free my parents from my burden,” Maria reasoned, trying hard to at least chuckle a bit. But all she could muster was to sit in the grass on the banks of the pond, eyes fixed on the water as the picnic basket rested next to her.

After a time, she began to pick at the food that had been packed. Salted meat, cheese, and bread. It reminded her a bit of the food she’d been given while on the pirate ship as she ate the salted meat, but a finer quality than that of what she had eaten before. Her mind went over again and again every memory she had of James, all the good mixed with the bad. She’d carry these thoughts the rest of her life,

keeping James alive in her mind and close to her heart.

Maria absentmindedly placed her hand to her stomach, feeling it beneath her gown as she wondered if she was gaining weight. It felt fuller than before, and perhaps that had been because her mother was always fussing over her to eat more at dinner. She wondered if her mother believed that she'd been starved to while out at sea, and Maria tried to appease her mother by eating a bit more at each meal. Now she feared that perhaps by indulging her mother she'd gain more weight than what was deemed ladylike in society's eyes.

Maria sighed then, disgusted by the idea of what society deemed proper for a young lady. It was certainly too much pressure and often forced a woman to act against her nature. Though Maria enjoyed playing the pianoforte, she didn't do it to seem more appealing to a gentleman. She did it for her own pleasure. And if she did gain a little weight around her stomach, at least she'd be happy.

As Maria stood in the hope of taking a short walk around the pond, a frightful idea wound its way through her mind. What if she was pregnant with James' child? The thought startled her, causing her to stop her movements as she stared ahead of her. She placed both her hands this time on her stomach, trying to determine if indeed she was pregnant. It had been two months since she'd last spent a night in James' arms, so surely she would have discovered some sort of sign by now. But as Maria thought of her feelings and wellbeing over the last few weeks, it was hard to tell since she'd felt all sort of symptoms that had been associated with her travels.

Maria forced herself to keep moving and start contemplating what she would do if her stomach continued to grow. If it became apparent, she would have to tell her parents the truth. And if she did, would they still be accepting of her? Would they toss her and the child out, or force her to give birth in secret and have the child sent away once it was born? Fear and dread filled her as she walked slowly, terrified of the idea that her and James' child would be sent away the moment it

was born. No, if Maria was expecting, she'd do everything she could to keep and raise the child. Even if her family disowned her. If this thought came to fruition, she wouldn't allow her parents to take away this last part of James that she could have. She'd fight everyone off in order to have this child. And with that thought in mind, Maria began to pray that she was pregnant.

~\*~

As the prisoners were brought before the court that day, James was a stark contrast to his fellow pirates. Though he couldn't consider them pirates anymore and just English prisoners, he still knew these men deeply and could still recognize them. Even under the layer of filth and blood, he could still see familiar faces. But James, on the other hand, looked very different in comparison. He'd been bathed, given an English haircut, dressed in fine clothes, and fed regular meals. It was only his dark skin that showed that he wasn't an Englishman. Many in the room even pointed at James and murmured, unsure why the man was being brought in with the rest of the pirates.

"Quiet in the court!" yelled the magistrate as he banged his gavel against the wooden podium. "Here before the Court of England stand trial the pirates who aligned themselves with Captain Maidus, also known as Lord Andros." More murmuring rang out around the room, causing the magistrate to bang his gavel once more.

"These pirates are charged with stealing, plundering, murder, impersonation of navy officers, kidnapping, and all manner of treason against the King of England." Yells rang out around the room as anger and hatred filled the space. Those whose family members had been killed at Portsmouth had come to watch the trial and now took their opportunity to yell obscenities at those who had murdered their families. After a few minutes of this, the magistrate called order to the room once more.

“These men before you are found guilty under English law and are condemned to hang at the Execution Dock this very next morning at sunrise,” the magistrate called before the room erupted into chaos once more, some cheering, some yelling more profanities. To James, it didn’t matter. He knew his fate the moment he’d been bound and pulled onto the navy ship. James knew not to hope when all hope was lost.

“I object!” called a man as he descended a staircase into the court room and approached the magistrate at his podium. Gasps filled the room as all eyes turned to Lord Lucas, following the man in his movements to the front of the room.

“Lord Lucas, this is quite surprising. Surely you could not have any objections to these men being hung for their evil deeds,” the magistrate argued, shocked to see a duke in his court room, and even further surprised that the man would object to his decision.

“Indeed, honored magistrate, I agree with your terms. But there is one man amongst them that is my son,” the Duke declared, sending more gasps and whispers spreading quickly through the crowd.

The magistrate looked at the Duke with wide eyes before turning his gaze upon the pirates, noticing the one that didn’t look like the others. He motioned for the guards to bring the man forth, taking the time to look between the prisoner and the duke.

“He certainly has your eyes, my lord,” the magistrate reasoned.

Lord Lucas chuckled as he looked at his soon. “Indeed, he does,” he replied.

“But what proof do you have of your relationship, my lord?” the magistrate questioned, wondering if this was all some sort of trick. Perhaps the pirate had blackmailed the Duke?

“I was sailing with my dear friend, Admiral Travis, when I met my wife, Tanya in Tripoli. We married and sailed for many months with Admiral Travis and his officers, intent on returning to England. It was on our travels back home that we were attacked by pirates. My darling wife, who had just given birth, died in the attack. And as I watched the ship burn around me, I also caught sight of our son in his crib, the side of it on fire.

“Everyone who survived was bound and taken hostage by the pirates. I remember hearing the cries of my son from my cell aboard the pirate ship. I knew that he was alive. But when I was dropped off at a port in Spain, having been ransomed, I never saw my son again. Since that day, I’ve searched every port looking for him. Every pirate that has come into the English prisons I have questioned and interrogated, hoping to catch word of my son.

“When I heard that a pirate ship from Tripoli had been attacked and its pirates captured, I had little hope left that I would ever find my son after thirty years. But as you can see,” Lord Lucas said as he lifted up James’ left pant leg, displaying the burn marks on his leg, “this man not only looks like me, but bears the same burns that I watched my son endure.”

Loud remarks filled the room as they all considered the Duke’s words. The magistrate had been put in a hard position. If he denied the Duke and sent his alleged son to the gallows, he’d be shunned in society. If he let the pirate go, perhaps it would be better than to earn himself an enemy from such a prestigious family. As the magistrate was making his decision, it was then that Lord Lucas leaned forward and promised

the magistrate a large sum of money if he let his son go.

With little needed to convince him otherwise, the magistrate pounded on his gavel, declaring, "Lord Lucas' son shall be released and pardoned for all actions against the King of England!" There was chaos in the courtroom as the guards removed the chains from James and quickly stepped away. Lord Lucas then quickly led his son from the court room as shouts continued to rain around him.

James didn't dare look back at his family, knowing that soon his fellow crew members would all be dead. He wanted to part with Leonardo with some words of encouragement, that the afterlife would be kind to the older man who had treated him like a son for so many years. But instead, James gathered the rest of his strength and moved forward, hoping that one day he could put all of this behind him. Now he couldn't help but wonder if he could see Maria again.

## Chapter 30

It was as if James was dreaming. One minute he'd been chained, preparing for his execution. The next he was dining in luxury at his father's townhouse in London. It all appeared rather odd to him as he was served for the first time in his life. The finery of the townhouse, from its marble floors to the high ceilings and bright chandeliers, stirred the pirate in him. There was much he could steal and sell for a high price. But he had to keep reminding himself that he wasn't a pirate anymore.

"So, James, tell me about yourself," Lord Lucas suggested after their meal had come to an end. James had never eaten so much in his life, and as he'd watched his father eat, he tried to refrain from gobbling everything in sight and actually use the silverware.

James wiped his mouth on a napkin as he told his father the same story he'd told Maria the night they drank and listened to the guitar. James smirked, remembering the fond memory. He was eager to discuss Maria with his father once he felt he could trust the man. And once he'd discovered his father's agenda.

"Ah, your mother's sister, Bianca. You know, she first appealed to me when I met your mother's family at the market. Bianca was bubbly and quick to please. But it was your mother, Tanya, who caught my eye because of her beauty and rebellious nature," Lord Lucas said, remembering the sunny day he'd first cast his eyes upon Tanya.

James was surprised since he hadn't spoken his mother's sister name to his father, thus confirming that Lord Lucas really was his father. It made James wonder what it would be like to have a father after all

these years. "I've always wanted to know more about my mother. Bianca told me only the facts of what happened, but it never really gave me a sense of who my mother was," James spoke up, in complete awe that he had a real father.

Lord Lucas smiled at his son, having a hard time believing that his dream of thirty years was finally coming true. Though James looked rough from his years at sea, he could still see faint signs of his Tanya in him. "Your mother was the most wonderful woman I have ever met; from here to India, I've never met another like her. The ship I was traveling on was docked in Tripoli for a week. That's all it took for me to fall in love with her, and for her to fall in love with me. Before the ship left, we married in secret and boarded the navy ship as husband and wife, setting our sights on traveling the world with plans to settle in England one day," Lord Lucas explained, his gaze reaching to a far off place as he recalled the memories.

"There were many things that delighted me about Tanya. She was beautiful both inside and outside. She was kind to everyone she met and had the patience of a saint when dealing with intolerable people," Lord Lucas said with a chuckle. "Tanya and I enjoyed sailing together, visiting every foreign market in search for small trinkets that would one day decorate our home and remind us of our first trip together. And it wasn't long before she was expecting you."

Lord Lucas winked at his son, causing James to smile. He could almost picture what his mother looked in his mind as his father described her. At least now he knew where his love for sailing came from. And the fact that he had two loving parents filled a void in his heart that had been empty for so long, even with his love for Maria.

"The day she died was the worst day in my life. The navy ship had been bound for England because I wanted to settle down now that you had been born. Pirates attacked our ship, killing your mother and setting fire to everything. I watched a young man steal you from your crib after you'd been burned, and as I was tied and bound, I couldn't



get to you. For years the guilt of losing you and your mother has haunted me,” Lord Lucas said, tears coming to his eyes. “I have never taken another wife, and I’ve spent all my days searching for you, praying that you’d survived and were alive somewhere in the world.”

James had his own tears in his eyes as he looked at his father, so many features in his aging face reminding him of his own appearance. It was as though he was looking in a mirror or seeing a picture of himself and of what he would look like later in life. James watched as Lord Lucas wiped his eyes clear of tears and straightened his posture once more.

“But that is all now in the past, and we have a bright future together,” Lord Lucas declared, standing from the table. “Come, my son. We have much to discuss.”

Lord Lucas led his son from the dining room into another fashionable room that Lord Lucas had to explain to James was a sitting room. “Is there is room for every activity?” James asked with a laugh.

Lord Lucas loved the way his son viewed everything and couldn’t help but laugh with him. “In my home, it would more than likely appear so. You see, I am a duke. The next in rank would be the Prince of England. So, as you can very well see, I have enough wealth to live a very comfortable life,” Lord Lucas explained, enjoying being able to watch his son as he thought deeply about all of this.

“I’m very happy for you,” James commented, not knowing what else to say. This time, it was Lord Lucas who laughed heartily, seeing that James had inherited his mother’s kindness.

“My dear son, you are also very wealthy. As my son, you will one day

be Duke of Kemberly and inherit all that I have and own. Till that time, you shall want for nothing and I shall educate you on how to manage the dukedom,” Lord Lucas explained.

James became very still then as his father’s words sunk in. It was all rather strange because James had spent his whole life living with the intention of owning his own ship one day. The thought of staying on land for a long period of time didn’t settle well with him. But as he thought about Maria, he knew that if he was going to seek her out, being the son of a duke was bound to give him the chance to finally be with her again.

“You’ll have to forgive me, Father, because this has all been quite sudden. I was fully prepared for death just hours ago, and now I’m being given a second chance at life with the ability to live comfortably. I will not lie and say I’m not a bit overwhelmed,” James said as he looked at his father, hoping the man would show him a little leniency.

“Of course, James, of course. I don’t expect you to know my way of life by tomorrow. There is still plenty of time to learn these things and I dare say I don’t expect to die anytime soon,” Lord Lucas said, a smile reaching his eyes. James smiled in return, feeling a sense of relief. “We will take things one day at a time and I’ll teach you a little here and there as we go about our days. In time, you can decide for yourself what you want to make of the rest of your life. And when you’re ready, I’d be happy to introduce you to society when you are interested in taking a wife.”

James took his chance, knowing that the best way to make new friends would be to speak with complete honesty. “Father, that is something I would like to discuss with you. You see, there is already an English woman I have fallen in love with,” James declared, shocking his father.

“My word. That I was not expecting. Pray tell, where did you meet such a woman?” Lord Lucas asked, positively intrigued.

James smiled as he dove into his tale of Maria, how he’d met her and the experiences they’d been able to share together in the short time they were aboard a ship. James explained how the navy ship had captured them, having been employed to rescue Maria. And even then, Maria had declared her love for him.

“You see, Father. Now that I am of means and of a prestigious family, like Maria, I want to find a way to see her again and perhaps gain her hand in marriage,” James ended with. He’d watched his father closely, a bit worried about what the man would think of his story.

A smile crept onto the older man’s face as he thought that his son’s love story was very charming. “Well, it seems that you have much to learn about English society in a very short amount of time. In the morning I’ll have Duncan search for the whereabouts of Lord Willcox and we’ll make preparations to visit with him and his family right away,” Lord Lucas declared as he stood with his port in hand. “Now seems as fitting as any time to begin your education. You’ll need to know some things if you’re going to impress Lord Willcox.”

“Thank you, Father,” James said as he stood with the man. “I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to repay what you’ve done for me.”

Lord Lucas clasped his son on the shoulder as he looked deeply into his dark green eyes. “It is the least I could do after I lost your mother. She would be happy to know that we are finally together. I will do her honor justice by ensuring your happiness,” Lord Lucas declared.

For what felt like the dozenth time that day, James was surprised by the kindness of his father as the man led him from his room and towards what he called the study, intent on teaching him all he knew about etiquette, customs, and English culture. James had a feeling that it was going to be a long night. But if it meant that it would allow him to marry Maria one day, then he was ready to work hard to prove himself to her family.

~\*~

A fortnight later, Lord Willcox sat in his study, enjoying a good book on a warm day, when Mr. Thatcher came in and delivered him the morning post. Amongst the letters that were addressed mostly to Lady Willcox, Lord Willcox noticed a peculiar letter that he did not recognize the penmanship of. Picking up the letter as he set his book aside, Lord Willcox turned the letter over and gasped as he read the name of the sender.

“Dear Lord, what could the Duke of Kemberly want to write to me for?” Lord Willcox wondered aloud as he tore open the letter and began to read. The more Lord Willcox read, the larger his eyes grew.

“Thatcher!” Lord Willcox called into the open hallway, causing his butler to scurry to the study.

“Yes, my lord?” Mr. Thatcher said, surprised to hear his master shout as he was normally a very mellow man.

“Summon my family in the drawing room at once. I must share some splendid news with them. Have Mrs. Bath bring a tea tray,” Lord Willcox explained as he stood from his desk and followed Mr. Thatcher out of the room and towards the drawing room. Lord Willcox

could hardly contain his glee as his family came into the room several minutes later.

“What on earth is going on?” Lady Willcox asked once she noticed the way in which her husband was smiling, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. Maria had settled into a chair to watch what was about to unfold, quick to gather a teacup in her lap as she listened to her parents.

“I’ve just received a very unusual letter from Lord Lucas, Duke of Kemberly,” Lord Willcox announced, causing the room to fall into an instant silence.

“My word, what did the Duke write to you about?” Lady Willcox eventually said as she settled into a chair.

“My dear, he has written to announce his coming into the country, to our very neighbourhood. And, he’s throwing a party so that he might meet everyone. He’s sent as an invitation, hoping we’ll attend and get to meet his son as well,” Lord Willcox explained with excitement, his eyes falling on both his children.

“But, Father, Lord Lucas doesn’t have a son. At least, no one I’ve ever met,” Gregory spoke up, finding this all rather peculiar.

“Indeed, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of Lord Lucas having a son. Do you think he’s illegitimate and that is why they’ve come to the country?” Lady Willcox said, surprised that they would ever be invited to a dinner party of a duke.

“I say we find out,” Lord Willcox offered as he looked at his family. “I wish to respond to Lord Lucas’ letter immediately but wanted to speak with you all on the matter before I did so.” This time Lord Willcox

focused his gaze on his daughter as she looked up at him from where she sat.

Maria took a deep breath, knowing that the final decision would rest upon her. She appreciated her father's kindness but could also tell how excited they all seemed to discover who the duke's son was. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to socialize for an evening. Here in the country, it wasn't unusual to attend a dinner party, but they were rather infrequent compared to that of Town. She reasoned it couldn't hurt to spend just one night amongst society.

"I'm sure we'll all have a lovely time, Father. It will be interesting to discover the story of the Duke's son since no one has ever heard of there being one," Maria agreed, at least having something to keep her mind occupied. Perhaps the man was lame and therefore the Duke had kept him hidden for years. There was certainly a story to be told considering the matter, and it would give Maria something to look forward to.

"Fantastic. I shall respond to the Duke this very instant and we shall look forward to this dinner party in a fortnight," Lord Willcox declared before he quickly left the room.

Lady Willcox chuckled as he watched her husband scurry off. "My dears, you have such a wonderful father. He could very well not have informed us of his decision, but instead he took the time to speak with us first. What a doting father you two have," Lady Willcox declared as she looked lovingly at her children. "And I can only guess that there will be dancing and such after dinner. I wonder how large of a party it will be."

"As long as Miss Julia is not present, I believe I'll have a splendid time," Gregory announced. Maria couldn't help but laugh at her brother's plight. There weren't too many eligible ladies in the country,

and he'd been rather called upon by Miss Julia's parents.

"You should simply expect to see her so that you may be less displeased, brother. She is of a good family and will no doubt be invited as well," Maria reasoned as she took a sip of her tea. Though it was lavender, it gave her a funny taste in her mouth. She quickly set the cup aside, curious to know why she didn't find it comforting like normal.

"I'm quite curious to know which other families have been invited. And with a fortnight to prepare, I'm sure I could discover who has received a letter from the Duke," Lady Willcox thought, already planning who she'd like to call upon that morning to discover which of her neighbours would be dinning with the Duke and his son as well.

"Well, Mama, I'll leave you to your discoveries. I've been meaning to practice the pianoforte and think I'll do so now," Maria said as she stood.

"How lovely, dear. I look forward to hearing you play. Perhaps you'll even be able to play for the Duke," Lady Willcox said, the thought exciting her more.

"I pray not, Mother. I am out of practice and would not be able to be ready for a performance in even a fortnight," Maria said with a shake of her head.

"You never know, my dear. You simply never know," Lady Willcox said as Maria left the drawing room, seeking solitude elsewhere in the house. Though Maria had done her best to appease her family, she herself was not looking forward to the social outing. She'd much rather stay home but didn't want to offend anyone.

“Always a saint, dear sister,” Gregory said as he came into the other room with her. Maria settled down at the pianoforte and began looking through the sheet music.

“I don’t know what you speak of, brother,” Maria replied with a coy smile as she settled on a piece and began playing the tune. Her brother simply bent down and placed a kiss on top of her head before settling down in a chair to listen to her play. For the rest of the morning, the two enjoyed the mutual pleasure of music without needing to speak a single word.



## Chapter 31

“Are you nervous, my son?” Lord Lucas asked as he came into James’ bedchamber to review his attire for the evening. Lord Lucas thought his son looked handsome in his tailored clothes. The tailcoat fit him perfectly, and as his servant finished fastening his cravat, he looked like a true gentleman.

“I’m more nervous about wearing all of these layers,” James said with a chuckle. “It will take some time to get used to.” James stood in front of a full-length mirror observing himself. If it wasn’t for his tanned skin, he would blend in with the other gentlemen attending the dinner party. Under his tailcoat he wore a vest, with a muslin shirt underneath. He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to dance with such constrictive clothing. At least his trousers weren’t too tight, though his boots came up higher than he preferred. But he had to remind himself that he wasn’t dressing to work aboard a ship. He was dressed tonight to impress those in society, and most importantly, Maria’s family.

“All in good time, my son. I will say that you look rather handsome and will no doubt make an impression tonight,” Lord Lucas declared as he gestured towards the open door. “It won’t be long before the guests will be arriving, and we should head downstairs to greet them. I’m sure everyone is eager to meet you since I didn’t have a son a month ago.” Lord Lucas chuckled as he led James from the room.

James had learned quickly that his father had a wonderful sense of humor, and though he was a duke, he was rather relaxed towards him. On occasion James had met a few of his father’s associates, and everyone seemed to act as though on pins and needles around them. James hoped that this dinner party would be a more relaxed affair, considering he was about to see Maria once again.

James tried to keep his breathing mellow as he descended the staircase with his father. The house they had moved into was rather lavish with countless rooms. James had never imagined a house could be so large and often thought of it as hollow, because very few people lived inside it, although James had enjoyed seeing the countryside and the wide open spaces that surrounded the estate. He'd been tempted to travel off the estate grounds in search of Maria but had controlled his urges. He understood now that it would be improper since he hadn't been introduced to her parents yet.

Now he simply had to wait until Maria appeared with her family. He looked forward to seeing her again and gaining the opportunity to ask her to marry him now that he was more eligible for her. But a part of him also hoped that he didn't scare her. She was bound to be overwhelmed and he prayed that this night would go smoothly.

~\*~

"My goodness, Maria. You are the image of an angel," Lady Willcox exclaimed as Maria came down the stairs to the foyer to prepare to leave with her family to the dinner party. This outing had been the only thing Lady Willcox had spoken of since her father had received the invitation, and her mother had even purchased her another new gown for the occasion. Maria had done her best to please her parents, but still continued to wish that this evening would pass by quickly.

"Thank you, Mother. I owe all my thanks to you," Maria said as she smoothed down her gown. It was a deep green, silk dress that reminded her of an emerald. And though she loathed thinking of anything resembling an emerald, she wasn't going to upset her mother by sharing those details of her past with her. Instead, Maria had commented how beautifully it matched her eyes and highlighted her hair. Lace trimmed the bottom of the gown, adding an extra touch of finery that Lady Willcox had insisted upon, even though they were

only attending a dinner party. Her lady in waiting had pinned Maria's hair up in an expert design, allowing ringlets of hair to fall around her face, framing it in a halo of gold.

"Certainly, my dear. How I do love to see you so. I might even reckon that you'll be the talk of the party, even more so than the Duke's son," Lady Willcox said with a fit of giggles. Maria couldn't help but laugh with her at the excited way she talked. She was at least content to see her mother so well.

"Well then, shall we be off?" Lord Willcox suggested before his wife became even more ridiculous. He was happy for his family, and for the excited way his wife was acting for this event since he'd seen her so unwell for such a lengthy part of the year. But he also hoped that his wife would be able to contain herself for the duration of the party.

Gregory led his sister from the house behind their parents. He leaned close to her and whispered, "If Mother continues on like this, I'm sitting next to Miss Julia at dinner." Maria did her best to contain her laughter as she hid her mouth behind her hand.

"You are trouble, Gregory," Maria said as he helped her up into the waiting carriage.

"Always, dear sister," he replied as he stepped into the carriage behind her.

"This is going to be such a splendid evening," Lady Willcox said eagerly as the carriage took off from the house. Maria endured the chatting of her mother the entire ride to the Duke's estate. She kept her focus to the scenery passing by the open window, forcing her mind not to wander or think about what plagued her most. Though

she felt the need to, she didn't place her hand over her stomach in fear of revealing her secret. Maria was fighting hard to keep her focus on the event before her, instead of the event that would take place in a few months when her child would be born.

"Ah, what a lovely looking home," Lady Willcox exclaimed as the carriage took the lane up to the house. Maria leaned forward and looked more clearly out the window, surprised by the vastness of it. It was elegant in design, with Roman columns framing the front of the house. Large steps led up to the front door where Maria could see several families walking up. It appeared that this dinner party would be a rather large affair.

As their carriage came to a stop in the courtyard, the door was opened by a footman dressed in fancy attire. Maria did her best to suppress a giggle at the absurdity as her father and brother stepped down from the carriage, followed by her mother and herself. She allowed Gregory to lead her to the front door as she leaned close to him.

"I've never seen a servant dressed so," she whispered, causing Gregory to laugh quietly.

"This duke must be of means if he can afford to dress his servants up for just a dinner party. I feel like we are attending a ball more than just dinner," Gregory whispered back as they came to stand in the reception line, waiting their turn to greet the Duke and his son.

"Perhaps the Duke is one of those types of men who like to flaunt their wealth," Maria reasoned as they stood in line. "With only one son and no wife, I'd say he has quite a fortune to spend idly."

"You must be right," Gregory said as they entered the house, and

couldn't help but look up at the tall ceilings many chandeliers that lit the foyer. Several portraits of landscapes lined walls that had all been papered with elegant designs. The floor was a beautiful dark wood that had been polished recently for the occasion. Maria stepped lightly in her slippers, not wanting to slip on the polished wood. Maria could at least say that the home was rather beautiful, with tones that were neither too masculine nor feminine. Even if the Duke had a grand wealth, he at least had good tastes for being single.

Maria's attention was pulled from viewing the house as they neared the front of the reception line. She looked towards her father as she heard her name being introduced. Her mother moved aside so Maria could curtsy to the Duke, an older man with a kind smile. After the introduction, she finally met the Duke's eyes and was surprised to see something familiar in his face.

"Miss Maria. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Might I have the pleasure of introducing you to my son, Lord James Lucas the Second, who I thought I had lost at sea almost thirty years ago," the Duke introduced, gesturing to his son.

As Maria's eyes fell on the Duke's son, her heart immediately jumped in her chest as all air seemed to be sucked out of her lungs. She fought to remain still and withhold her reaction but knew she would be discovered as her eyes roamed over James, her mind having a difficult time trying to rationalize how her love was now dressed in fine English clothing and being introduced as the Duke's son.

"Maria, you're staring," Gregory whispered into her ear, causing Maria to snap back to reality – that she was holding up the reception line and gawking at the Duke's son.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Lucas," Maria said with a curtsy. James bowed in return, a wide grin on his face. He took Maria's hand

then and kissed the air above it, her skin burning as she prayed that he'd kiss her hand with his tender lips that she remembered all too well.

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Maria. Might I have the pleasure of leading you to dinner once we assemble?" James asked, his eyes bright with happiness as he continued to hold her hand.

"Yes, Lord Lucas, you may," Maria replied, a smile coming to her face as her mind raced, trying to figure how this was all coming to be.

"I'll see you in the drawing room then," James said, finally dropping her hand as Gregory led her down the hallway. Lord and Lady Willcox regarded their daughter with much curiosity, never having seen their daughter react this way around a gentleman. They were also surprised by the Duke's words as he introduced his son, that the young man had been lost to him for years.

Maria didn't speak a word until her family was seated in the drawing room, a bit further from the others in the room. It was a grand room with many chairs and settees, allowing all who had been invited to sit comfortably. As Gregory handed her a cup of punch, Maria quickly drained the contents.

"That was rather unladylike," Lady Willcox scolded, looking quickly around the room to see if any of the other guests had just witnessed what her daughter had done. "What has come over you, child?"

"Forgive me, Mother. I will do better to control myself," Maria said as her eyes turned to her father. "I've met the Duke's son before, but he wasn't Lord Lucas then. He was simply James, another man aboard the pirate ship." Lord Willcox looked shocked as he regarded his

daughter. He feared there was some sort of trickery about but remained calm as he listened to his daughter.

Maria told her family the story James had told her of his past. She left the detail of him being a pirate out of her tale, and said that James was just a slave, forced to work upon the pirates' ship. It was a very close story to the truth, but she didn't understand how James had been discovered by his father after all these years.

"I'm sure there is more to this story that the Duke will have to explain in time. But Lord Lucas seems very fond of you, my dear," Lady Willcox said as she observed her daughter. She hadn't seen Maria smile this much since her debut into society as she attended her first ball.

"I'll admit, Mother, that I'm very fond of him as well. He showed me much kindness while I was being held captive. He even saved my life," Maria said as she then told her family of the frightful tale of falling overboard and not being able to save herself.

"My God, I must thank this man," Lord Willcox said as his eyes scanned the room, seeing if the Duke and his son had come into the drawing room at last.

"In time, my dear," Lady Willcox said as she rested a hand on her husband's. "I have a feeling that we need to wait and see how this night goes. There are many families in attendance tonight and I fear drawing attention to Maria and Lord Lucas. They've both suffered so."

Lord Willcox relaxed upon hearing his wife's words of wisdom. He nodded his head. "You're quite correct, my dear. Let us see how the night goes," Lord Willcox reasoned.

The room fell into soft whispers as the Duke and James entered the room. They moved slowly around the room, speaking idly with all. Maria watched the two of them closely, not caring if anyone spotted her staring. She could tell that the Duke enjoyed speaking of his son, often turning to him as he spoke. James simply smiled kindly, nodding his head now and again as if to confirm what his father was saying. Maria thought that the two of them looked well together and she was truly happy for James. She was also beside herself with emotion as it finally dawned on Maria that James was both alive, and in the same room as her.

After watching her sister follow the younger Lord Lucas with her eyes, Gregory leaned towards her and whispered, "You're more than just fond of the man." Maria pulled her eyes from James as she regarded her brother. He smiled kindly at her as she simply nodded her head. "He's the reason why you've been so withdrawn."

Maria didn't know what to say and took a moment to collect her thoughts. "There was no point to admitting my feelings for a man such as James. He was captured with the rest of the pirates and was soon to hang for simply following orders. How could I allow myself to feel any more for a man that should have been dead by now?" Maria whispered, watching Gregory closely, trying to determine what he would think of her now.

"You could have at least told me," Gregory replied. "Perhaps I could have shared the burden with you."

Maria patted his hand as she sighed. "What use would it have been now?" Maria said, a smile crossing her lips. "He's turned out to be the son of a duke." They both laughed softly but were soon interrupted as the Duke and James came near.



“Lord and Lady Willcox, I do hope you’re enjoying yourselves this evening,” the Duke said as he came and sat down next to Lord Willcox, surprising the man. James settled into a seat near Maria, their eyes locking for a moment before they turned their gazes back towards the Duke.

“Indeed, my lord,” Lord Willcox replied with a tip of his head.

“Yes, what a lovely house you’ve been able to occupy in the neighbourhood. I have faint memories of it from when I was a child, when a different lord did own it,” Lady Willcox described as she looked around the room. “And so many wonderful families have attended that I’m sure to enjoy myself.”

“Wonderful. I’m pleased to hear so, Lady Willcox. My dear wife did pass away shortly after we were married and James was born. I’ve been without a female touch in my life for so long that I was worried about the decor of the house, that it would be fitting for such an occasion,” the Duke explained, casting his eyes about.

“Fear not, my lord, the house has been designed wonderfully. No one would be able to say anything unpleasant about any aspect of the house,” Lady Willcox reassured, pleased to be of service to the Duke.

“Thank you for your kindness, Lady Willcox. I will be sure to call upon you if ever I need assistance with remodeling. It is good to know my neighbours since we plan to stay in the country for a good period of time,” the Duke explained, his eyes wandering to his son, and then to Maria. She smiled kindly as she looked at James out of the corner of her eyes, pleasantly surprised to see him looking at her. It reminded Maria of the time she’d watched him while she was supposed to be keeping watch over the ship late at night. The thought brought

warmth to her core as she forced herself to look away.

“Maria has taken the liberty of explaining your previous encounter aboard the pirate ship. Forgive me, Lord Lucas, for bringing up that terrible past. We always make sure not to mention it around Maria, but I feel compelled to thank you for saving my daughter when she had fallen overboard,” Lord Willcox spoke up, addressing James directly. Maria smiled kindly at her father, especially when she noticed tears in his eyes. James and Maria exchanged a look before he turned his gaze to Lord Willcox.

“It was my honor, sir, to ensure her safety and health while at sea. She might have been only a captive, but I felt compelled to watch over her,” James said honestly. He wanted desperately to reach out and take Maria’s hand into his but knew that now wasn’t the time for that.

“We are immensely thankful, Lord Lucas, that she had someone watching over her during that terrible ordeal,” Lady Willcox added, trying to keep her emotions under control. She always felt tearful anytime she was reminded of her daughter’s plight this past summer.

“Of course, Lady Willcox. And in turn I am thankful to my father for rescuing me from the gallows. I never knew that my father was still alive and only had the tale of my mother’s death as any clue to my past. It was he who rescued me and who has taught me of my English heritage. I’m very happy to be residing in England now and plan to make up for all the years I was separated from my father,” James explained, looking at his father with much pride and affection.

“My, what a tale to be told,” Lady Willcox exclaimed. “We all have so much to be thankful for, indeed.”

“I would greatly agree with you, Lady Willcox. So, let us celebrate this night the return of our children to England. That they may live the rest of their lives in happiness,” the Duke declared, standing to his feet as he turned his gaze to the opening doors leading to the dining room. The Duke made his way through the drawing room then, signaling the beginning of the meal. James stood as well, lending his arm to Maria, who took it without hesitation as she allowed him to lead her from the room.

“Is it really you, James?” Maria whispered as she looked up at the familiar face she’d come to love. It was simply hard for her to believe that all of this was happening.

“Yes, my love. It is I,” James responded as he spoke softly to her. “I know this all seems like some sort of dream. But I am really here, and plan to ensure our future together.”

Maria’s heart leapt with love for James as glee swept over her. She worked hard to keep her composure since there were so many eyes upon them. They would surely be the talk of the neighbourhood for some time since they both had just returned from sea. Surely the more intelligent members of their community would be able to put together the pieces of their meeting at the Duke’s dinner party.

Maria spent the entire dinner by James’ side as they talked about what had happened since their last parting. They kept their voices low and made sure to join the conversations around them, but mostly they kept their own company during the course of the meal. Maria would tease James from time to time on his table manners, but James would assure her that he was still learning.

“And what of your family in Tripoli? Surely your nephew will want to hear some news from you,” Maria asked, remembering the small elephant she’d enjoyed holding in her hand after she’d discovered it in

James' chest.

"I have written to my family, explaining all that has happened. It will take some time for them to receive my letter, and to gain their response, but I hope they will come and join me in England. My father has assured me that all would be welcome, so there are some who I hope will make the journey. Here in the country, we hope to be away from society's prying eyes," James explained as he took a sip of wine from his glass. His father had taught him to drink slowly, and never too much. So now he was learning to refrain from temptation, even though he loved fine wine.

"I think that is a splendid idea," Maria said, wondering what other plans James had for his future.

And as though he had been reading her mind, James stood from the table and addressed Maria. "Would you care to join me for a walk through the grounds, Miss Maria?"

Maria was surprised, but received encouraging gestures from her parents, her mother even giving her a shooing motion with her hands. Gregory moved his hands together as though he was clapping for her as she rose from the table, taking James' hand as he tucked it into his arms. Whispers filled the dining room as they departed out of the door that led to the gardens.

They walked in silence for a while, the sounds of crickets filling the air with their own music. The night's breeze was cool against their skin. James had felt rather warm in his layers and now felt tempted to shed a few, knowing that he could be comfortable with Maria. But he knew that eventually they'd have to return inside.

When they were a short distance from the house, James stopped and turned to Maria, his eyes shining with love and hope. He didn't say a word as used his hand to tilt Maria's face towards his, quick to claim her lips in a manner that he'd dreamed of since the day the pirate ship had been attacked.

Maria moaned against his mouth as passion sparked between them. She wrapped her arms around James, pulling him close as their tongues lashed out against each other, eager to taste and remember what it felt like to be together. Heat was quickly building in Maria's core, causing her to wish that they were in some place private where she could shed her clothes and allow James to show her the pleasure of lovemaking once more. But just as Maria began to pull on James' shirt, he pulled back, breaking their kiss as they panted hard.

"My dearest Maria, before I get ahead of myself, I must first ask you something," James said as he continued to hold her close. Maria settled her hands on his chest, feeling the beating of his heart under her hands as she stared up into his dazzling eyes.

"What is it, my love?" Maria asked, wondering what James would need to say that would prevent them from enjoying each other's kisses for a time before they would be expected back inside.

"If I gain your father's approval, will you marry me?" James asked so simply that Maria thought she had misheard him. But as the words fell over her, she smiled brightly as she leaned up on her tippy toes and kissed James soundly.

"Yes, James, yes! I'll marry you," she said against her mouth. She kissed him with passion then, only stopping when a thought came through her mind. "But James, we'll have to marry soon."

“Whatever you wish, my love. I would marry you tomorrow if it were possible,” James said as he was filled with a joy he never thought he’d feel again once the navy ship had attacked and he’d become a prisoner.

“James, you must understand. Recently I have begun to wonder if I’m with child,” Maria explained, startling James so that he became very still. Maria was afraid that perhaps the thought of becoming a father so soon would scare him off, and she wondered if maybe she should have waited to tell him until after the marriage. Maria was only able to breathe a sigh of relief when she saw him begin to smile in the pale moonlight.

“You’re going to have a baby?” James wondered softly, pure happiness flooding his body as he thought of becoming of father, of telling his father that soon he’d be a grandparent.

“Yes, James. I’m going to give birth to your son or daughter in a few months,” Maria confirmed. James let out a shout of happiness then as he picked Maria up in her arms and spun her about. Clapping sounded from the terrace, causing James and Maria to become very still.

“I assume that there is good news to be shared,” Gregory said as he joined them on the lawn.

“Indeed, brother. Lord Lucas has asked me to marry him, and I have agreed till Father can give his blessing,” Maria explained as she stepped back from James, creating space between them so they would be proper once more.

“I have no doubt that Father will give his full blessing,” Gregory said

as he shook James' hand. "I think I shall be calling you brother before too long, Lord Lucas."

"Please, call me James," he replied.

"Very well, then you must call me Gregory," her brother agreed.

Maria had never felt so happy in her life as she returned to the party with her fiancé on her arm. News of the engagement quickly spread through the party, especially once Lord Willcox had given his blessing and Lady Willcox exclaimed her glee. The Duke joined in with their joy, saying to Maria that he was glad to see that his son was happy. She was so full of joy that it was hard to part from James when the night came to an end and her family was preparing to leave.

"I'll come to visit with you tomorrow and we shall discuss wedding plans," James whispered in her ear as he led her out to the waiting carriage. "We shall arrange a date quickly so that I might have you in my bed once more."

Maria blushed as she giggled behind her hand. "Perhaps I will have to sneak into your room before then," she replied, making sure to keep her voice low.

"Hmm, I'm afraid that will be difficult since our rooms are quite far away now," James reasoned.

"There is no distance that will ever keep us apart now, James. I will make sure of that," Maria declared. James leaned down and placed a small kiss on her cheek, trying to be proper in front of her parents.

“Till tomorrow, my love,” James said as he helped her up into the carriage. “Goodnight, everyone.” He bowed then as he stepped back from the carriage.

“Goodnight, Lord Lucas,” Lady Willcox called from the carriage as it started down the lane. James had to admit that his future mother-in-law was a character, but he’d come to enjoy the company of all of Maria’s family.

As James turned then to head back into the house, his new home, he sent up a prayer of thanks for the way his life had turned out in the end.



## Epilogue

Maria took several deep breaths as she began to hear the organ playing the *Wedding March*. She hung tightly to her father's arm, praying she wouldn't trip on her gown on the way down the aisle.

"I can't believe today I am giving you away when I feel I just got you back," Lord Willcox said to his daughter before he led her into the church and to the alter where Lord Lucas, the future Duke of Kemberly, awaited.

"Father, fear not. I will only be down the lane, not all the way in Town. We could dine together each night if we wanted to. I'm sure Mother will be by almost every day to pay us a visit. But you must protect Gregory from Miss Julia as I will not be there to do so anymore," Maria said cheerfully, trying to reassure her father.

"It all feels rather soon, is all I'm saying," Lord Willcox said as he worked hard to gain his composure. He knew his wife was already in tears and didn't want to add to the strong emotions they were both feeling. He was pleased that his daughter was marrying for love, and someone who seemed to be a genuine good fit for his daughter. He also couldn't ignore the fact that his daughter would never want for anything as one day she'd be a duchess.

"That is easy to understand, Father. We simply did not want to wait because soon it would be too cold for a wedding and spring always takes too long to come," Maria said as she looked up at her father. "Now come, Lord Willcox. You must watch your daughter be married today."

Lord Willcox smiled at his daughter as she showed once again just how fierce she could be. He simply nodded as he led her then, the church filled with music and people who had come to see the Duke's mysterious son be married to a young lady he'd only just met. Or so they thought.

Maria walked down the walkway between the pews with her father, her eyes locking with James' the moment they stepped into the church. The walkway had been decorated with rose peddles strewn across the way, bouquets tied to the ends of every pew, and garland hung from the rafters, giving the church a holiday feel. Maria took deep breaths as her father led her at a slow pace, Maria's white, satin gown flowing behind her as the train of her dress trailed behind her. Pearls had been sewn into the gown, making Maria sparkle as she walked. Her hair had been pinned up on top of her head with several more pearls to decorate it.

Maria felt a spark pass through her as her father placed her hand inside of James'. He kissed her cheek before her went to sit down with her mother, and Maria was left to stare up into the eyes of the man she'd come to love so much during the most traumatic time in her life. No matter what they had experienced in the past, it had all led to this moment.

Maria would always remember the clothes James wore aboard the pirate's ship, and the days when he only wore trousers. Now he was dressed in a brand-new suit, completely dressed in black besides his muslin shirt. His hair had been styled for the occasion, but she wondered if he'd ever grow it long again.

James barely listened to the words of the preacher as he stared into Maria's green eyes that completely captivated him. She looked radiant in her wedding gown and he was so proud to be able to marry such a wonderful woman. And yet, at the back of his mind, he couldn't deny

that he was also excited to bring her back to the estate and have his way with her. That thought became stronger as the preacher announced them husband and wife, and James bent down to claim Maria's lips, passion sparking between them.

Maria pulled away first, a fierce blush coming to her cheeks as she kissed James in public for the first time. It was an exciting experience that she couldn't wait to do again. But for now, they needed to make their way to the Duke's estate and get ready to greet their guests, now as husband and wife. Without another word, James led her down the walkway as they waved at their friends and family and quickly stepped up into the waiting carriage so they could make it to the estate before their guests.

"I love you," James said as he pulled Maria against his body, chuckling softly as the train of her dress filled up the rest of the carriage. He was still getting used to English clothing and looked forward to shedding his clothes as soon as they were alone in his bedchamber.

"And I love you," Maria replied as she moved onto his lap, pressing her lips against him. As the carriage continued to roll down the lane, Maria took her time kissing James, letting her tongue slip between his lips so that she could taste him. James was enjoying the assertive way in which he was being kissed by Maria, his ardor rising quickly as he pictured having her bare in his arms once again.

As the carriage came to a stop, Maria giggled as she slid off James' lap as the footman came to open the door. James didn't have time to arrange his trousers as he stepped down and helped Maria do the same. But the moment her feet were on the ground, he bent down and picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder like he had done once, so very long ago.

“James, how dare you carry me like this!” Maria yelled even though she laughed the entire way up the front stairs, through the foray, and up the staircase that led to James’ bedchamber.

“You’ll have to forgive me, my dear,” James called back as he walked quickly down the hallway. “But I’m afraid we don’t have much time.”

James set her down once they had reached his bedchamber. He quickly pushed open the door and ushered her inside, locking it behind them before he turned on his wife and began pulling at her dress.

“This is ridiculous,” James declared as he withdrew a small dagger from his boot and sliced the gown down the back, causing the cool air of the room to hit Maria’s skin, sending a wave of chills over her. She stood perfectly still, allowing James to cut the clothes from her body, sending a pool of wetness to gather between her legs. With only her stockings remaining, James picked her up and took her over to the bed, her legs wrapping around his waist as she wiggled against him.

Though her stomach had grown a bit rounder, James still loved the way Maria looked without an article of clothing on. He was quick to discard his own clothing, tearing bits here and there in his hurry to feel her bare skin against his. He looked down at Maria, spread wide upon his bed, her cheeks flushed from excitement, and all he felt was love for this woman as he finally climbed on top of the bed with her.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” Maria admitted as she pulled James down to her face, claiming his lips as she felt his manhood press against the opening of her core. “But hurry. We will have to find other clothing before we return downstairs.”

James smiled as he took hold of both her legs, spreading them wide before he sunk into her warm, wet core, causing Maria to cry out in ecstasy. At first, James started a slow rhythm, pulling out only to plunge back into her, causing Maria to moan his name over and over again. James quickened his pace, loving the way her breasts bounced with each thrust. He then put her legs over his shoulders and grasped her from behind, kneading the flesh of her rear end as he sunk deeper into her.

“Faster, James!” Maria called out as she grasped the bed linens, needing to feel James fill her with his seed. She could feel the intense gathering of her own ecstasy building within her core, and she desperately wanted to feel the high of falling over the edge with him.

James obeyed his wife’s commands as he pounded his manhood into her tight core that seemed to squeeze every inch of him. He wanted this pleasure to last forever but knew that soon the estate would be filled with the wedding guests, and they’d be sure to hear Maria’s moans as she began to become louder with each thrust of his hips into hers.

As Maria cried out in pleasure, it was all he needed to come over his own edge as he spilled his seed into his wife, holding her close as the waves of pleasure washed over both of them. James held her close as they came down from their high together, their love for each other increasing with every moment. He knew that soon he’d be holding their child in his arms, and he couldn’t imagine a brighter future no matter how hard he tried.

After their panting subsided, and he had kissed Maria several times more, he helped her from the bed and even took the time to wash her body with a clean cloth and water from the nearby dresser.

“Whatever shall I wear now?” Maria wondered as she looked at the

tattered remains of her wedding gown on the floor.

“Let me dress and I’ll fetch some things from your private room,” James suggested.

“But won’t they surely know what we’ve done once I appear again in a different gown,” Maria wondered as a blush came to her cheeks.

“My dear, if they haven’t already heard your cries of pleasure, I’m certain that they will know soon when I bring you back to this room and have my way with you again,” James said as he circled his arms around his wife and began to kiss her again.

“Enough, James. Run and gather me some clothes quickly before someone comes looking for us,” Maria said as she laughed, knowing that she was about to shock everyone, but found that she didn’t really care. After all, she would one day be a duchess and would never have to care about anyone’s opinion again. Not that she ever bothered to tolerate the opinions of others and always spoke her mind.

As her husband dashed out of the room with nothing but a pair of trousers on, Maria knew that she would live the rest of her life happily married to the pirate she had fallen in love with. No one would have guessed that Maria would fall in love with her capturer, and that she would make it back to England alive, but anyone who looked at her could tell that Maria was a happy woman who would never allow despair to get in her way of being the woman she was always destined to be. Wild and fierce would Maria be for the rest of her days.

***THE END***

*Can't get enough of Maria and James? Then make sure to check out the*

*[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

*How will Maria's brother manage to get his own happily ever after?*

*What kind of surprise does Maria have for Gregory at the dinner party*

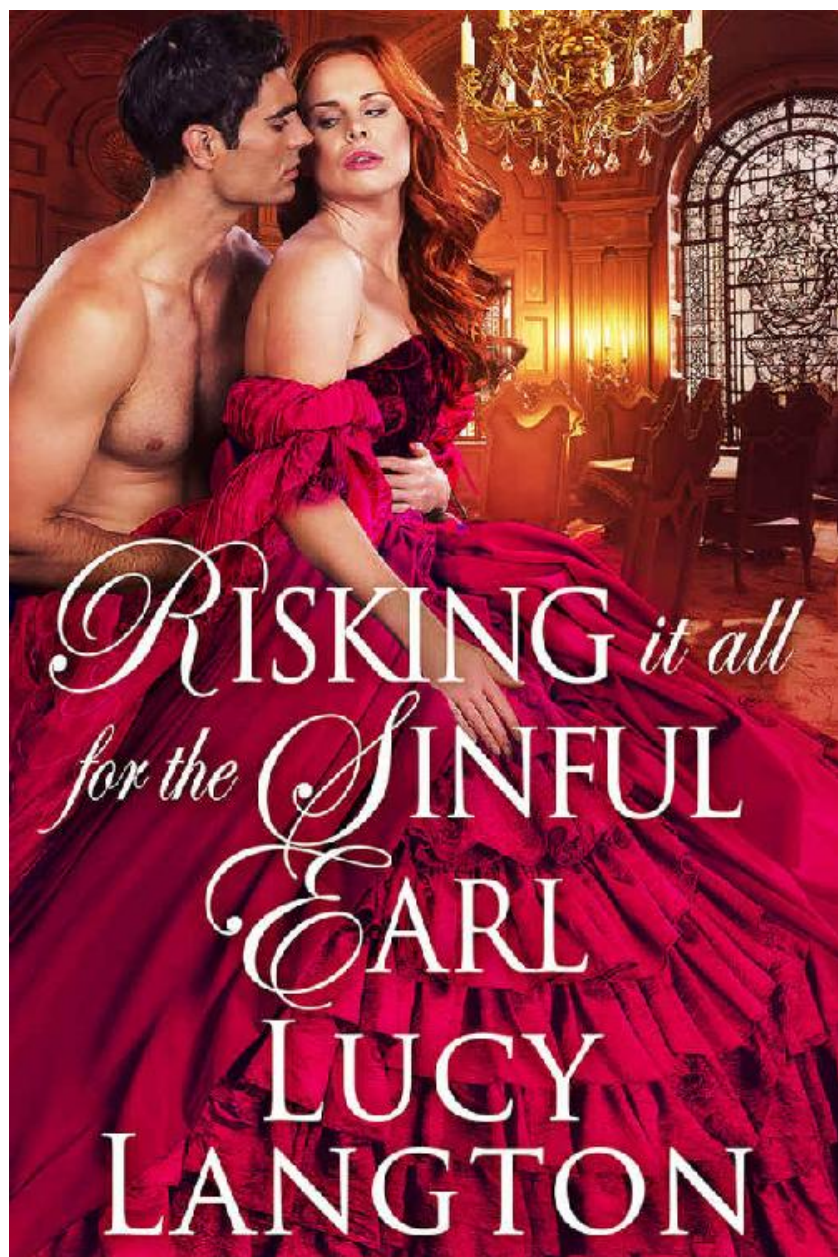
*they attend?*

*How does the couple manage to maintain the passion as the years go by?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://lucylangton.com/maria>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “**Risking it All for the Sinful Earl**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*





# Risking it All for the Sinful Earl

## Introduction

Since Lady Emilia Grey and her brother lost their parents at a young age, a simple life without privilege or tradition is all that she's known. But all she ever wanted is a loving home to call her own. So, it comes as a surprise when she catches the eye of the most powerful man in London at the ball that Lady Constance Belmore organised. What does the future hold for her after that fateful meeting?

Lord Joshua Pembroke, Earl of Derby, is a powerful man who is no stranger to high society. In fact, he governs it. When it comes to women, the Earl can pick and choose as he pleases. But upon seeing Emilia, a woman unlike any other he has ever met, a fire will start inside him. Lord Joshua is certain that he will have her. But how far is he willing to go to get her?

When blackmail is the tool used to get Emilia, there's no going back. Is their undeniable attraction enough to make a forced marriage succeed? Does she have the courage to give full rein to her deepest desires? When it comes to the union between Emilia and the Earl of Derby, all bets are off.

## Chapter 1

Lady Emilia Grey looked about the stately ballroom of Lady Constance Belmore and felt her heart beat wildly in her chest. It was her first ball of her first London season, and Lady Emilia didn't feel entirely ready to face the *ton*.

Her brother and chaperone, Lord Roderick Grey, had assured Emilia that despite her tendency towards shyness, she'd make a fantastic debut at the tender age of eighteen, but Emilia thought otherwise. She was not the kind of girl who found interaction with the fellow upper echelon of society to be difficult. In fact, Emilia had an effortless, attractive mystique. At least, that was what confidantes had told her for some time. For Emilia, this merely came from a genuine interest in other people. She tended to like those she met for the first time, even if they were a tad haughty, for Emilia Grey found society in general to be quite fascinating.

Despite the fascination, Emilia preferred quiet evenings at home with a book on her lap, her brother seated beside her. She'd remark to Roderick about which passages were funny, amusing, or even shocking. He would laugh in the face of Emilia's delight. But she did have to admit that when she was wrapped up in a good book, she could become rather animated.

But Emilia was far less animated that evening at Lady Constance Belmore's ball. As everyone around her was in such over-the-top fits of gaiety – perhaps because they felt that they must – Emilia chose to merely be amused by it all.

"And to think," Roderick said, seeing the delighted smile upon her face. "You wished to remain in the country this season."

“It was you who said you wished to remain in the country!” Emilia protested.

“That was because I forgot how old you are. I had to remind myself that you are no longer ten years of age and, therefore, coming to the London season is now a duty of yours, and of mine.”

“You did not have to come. You could have just thrown me to the wolves.”

“There’s nothing I want more in life than to see you fight off the wolves,” Roderick said with a smile. He regarded his sister for a moment, and Emilia feared she was being inspected in a way that did not make her entirely comfortable. “You look beautiful, sister,” Roderick finally said. “It fills me with disgust.”

In response to this, Emilia smiled yet again. “It is my mission to repulse you.”

“But in all truth,” Roderick went on, his tone changing. “You’re a vision. Mother and Father would be proud.”

Emilia saw a tear come to her brother’s eye and she, herself, needed to fight back a sob. The siblings had never known their parents in their adult lives. The Baron and Baroness of Rutledge had tragically died when Emilia and Roderick were still babies. Although Emilia always gazed at their paintings upon the wall, she had no recollection of what they had looked like in real life.

And Emilia did truly hope that her parents would be proud of her. She was the very image of the baroness, with her long, reddish-brown hair and warm brown eyes. And she had her father's height as well, a long, elegant form that gentlemen always admired. Whenever Emilia caught a man admiring her *gamine*, lean elegance, she would knit her brow in confusion. In Emilia's estimation, she was still the tomboyish adventurer who used to journey the hillsides, book in hand.

But Emilia did have to admit that things had changed since she turned eighteen. Coming out into society and finding a husband were duties she had to face. Roderick was good enough to be by her side, and Emilia hoped that he, in kind, might find a wife. Roderick, as well, was looking more and more like their late father every day. If Emilia was tall, then Roderick was exceedingly so. He had a strong jaw and the same soft brown eyes. Sometimes, when Emilia looked into those eyes, she saw herself.

"I fear this gown was the wrong choice," Emilia said regretfully.

"What do you mean?" Roderick asked, looking down at her pale blue dress.

"I have no doubt that all these women are clothed in fabric from France," Emilia said, with trepidation in her voice.

Roderick looked around the ballroom and laughed. Emilia could see that he understood her meaning, for all the women were draped in fabric so lavish and refined they may have been more likened to upholstered furniture from Versailles than women at a ball. Apparently, the trend was for large plumes of feathers in the ladies' hair as well as several bejewelled gold bracelets along the wrists, atop silk gloves that stretched up one's arms as high as could be. For Emilia's part, her hair was simply done, there were no bangles upon

her wrists, the fabric of her gown was plain, and her gloves barely passed her elbows. Essentially, Emilia felt that she had a lot to learn.

“It is a bit of a peacock farm, isn’t it?” Roderick said.

It wasn’t that Emilia and her brother were lacking in funds. Whatever the Baron and Baroness of Rutledge owned was passed down to them, and they spent that fortune modestly. Neither of them went for extravagance and so they were prudent with their funds. And, being prudent was quite necessary for the Greys since, living off their parents’ estate, there was no additional income in the near future that they could depend upon.

“If only old Stanley could be here,” Roderick said, taking a flute of champagne from a passing tray. “He’d leave at once.”

“That is very true,” Emilia replied with a laugh. “I fear that Lord Stanley would scarce last a moment.”

Emilia was referring to their uncle, Lord Stanley Grey, the late baron’s brother. Upon the death of their parents, Lord Stanley raised the siblings until Roderick was of the appropriate age to be Emilia’s protector. Emilia and Roderick found Stanley amusing as they grew up. Something of a curmudgeon, and a stout fellow, Stanley was always complaining about one thing or another, and had no taste for society. He would scarce invite anyone to the home to dine with him. He preferred quiet and solitude. Emilia always wondered if she inherited this from him.

“But you realise,” Emilia went on, “Stanley would do perfectly well after a few glasses of champagne.”

“That is the honest truth,” Roderick replied, raising his glass into the air as though toasting their beloved Uncle Stanley.

And although they did love the man and were indebted to him, both knew there was never a closeness between them. Stanley was a distant man, bound to duty, but still with an air of detachment. For these reasons, Uncle Stanley would never feel like a father to them.

“Would you care to dance?” Roderick asked.

“I can’t dance with you,” Emilia protested, taking a dramatic step away from him.

“Not with me, silly. I’m referring to one of the eligible gentlemen on your dance card.”

Emilia had forgot about the dreaded dance card. Although the thought of dancing with handsome strangers did fill her with excitement, Emilia thought the prospect of being forced to dance with anyone to be terrifying at best. What if there was poor conversation? What if the man was cruel or haughty? What if she stepped on his toes? The latter possibility was the most horrifying, for Emilia was always stepping on toes during dances.

Looking down at the card, Emilia couldn’t help but muse over the thought of being someone’s wife. There was no pressing need for it, of course. The Greys were financially on solid ground and her elder brother was still not married. It would be the custom for Roderick to take a wife before Emilia took a husband. But Emilia had to admit that, despite her independent spirit and casual, shy nature, the

prospect of marrying did thrill her as well as the idea of creating a family with someone she loved.

But the heartbreak wrapped up in all of this was the notion of change. Emilia loved her brother dearly and because of their shared history was closer to him than brother and sister usually were. Roderick was her dearest friend. It pained her to think that both of them were now at the age where they should marry and drift apart. Could her husband ever be as dear a friend to her as Roderick was? Emilia greatly hoped so.

“Who makes the decisions about these dance cards?” Emilia asked, thinking that her brother was much more informed about the ways of society than she was.

“Our honourable hostess, of course. Lady Constance Belmore,” he said, motioning towards where the hostess sat fanning herself, surrounded by an entourage of admirers.

“She is beautiful, is she not?” Emilia said, marvelling at Lady Constance’s Viking-like blonde hair and blue eyes.

“She has more money than god,” Roderick replied.

“Funny she’s not yet married. I hear she’s in the midst of her twenties.”

“Although Lady Constance is rich, she’s also rather an unpleasant woman,” Roderick explained.



“How so?”

“Lady Constance has a rude, quarrelsome tongue. If you have anything nasty to say, go and sit beside her.”

“I never quite understood all that,” Emilia remarked. “Society and its mean, gossiping tongues.”

“It’s a sport, dear sister. Once you’re in society for long enough, you begin to understand.”

“I don’t imagine I’ll be in society long enough for that to happen to me.”

“No, your plan is to get in and then out swiftly. I can see it in your eyes,” Roderick said. “You’re just going to snatch up a husband like a sneaky bandit and then run back to the country with your spoils.”

“Brother, you’re making my sides ache,” Emilia protested, keeling over with laughter.

“Then you’ll lock your husband up in a room and only let him out at certain hours of the day. Occasionally, you’ll bring him bread to feed on.”

“Stop it, Roderick,” Emilia protested, the pain from all the laughter

not abating. "If I'm to be stealthy in this marriage business," Emilia went on, speaking as best she could through her tears, "then I imagine that you will be rather slow, like the fifty-year-old bachelor that one hears of at Almack's every Wednesday night, always looking for a wife."

"That will, indeed, be me," Roderick said, taking a fresh flute of champagne and placing his empty one upon the passing tray. "I plan to draw this business out for as long as possible. You may be uncomfortable here, but I'm rather enjoying myself."

"Is that so? When we first arrived, you looked rather bored."

Roderick's delighted expression slowly sank, as though a thought had occurred to him. He took a hearty sip of his drink and considered his words. Emilia had never seen her brother turn so serious.

"Have I said something wrong?" Emilia asked.

"No, no," Roderick said, his voice distant. "I fear this champagne is going too quickly to my head."

"Why did you turn so sad? When I said that you looked bored?" Emilia asked, thinking it strange.

"We'll talk of it later. For now, we must deal with Lady Constance Belmore."

“And why is that?” Emilia asked.

“Because she’s walking this way.”

Emilia turned to, indeed, find Lady Constance upon them.

“There’s a new face,” Lady Constance said, her blue eyes shimmering like water.

“Such a lovely home you have,” Emilia replied by way of being cordial.

“I take the opportunity to invite guests whenever I can. Especially new ones.”

“I’m indebted to your kindness.”

“How does it feel to be out in society, Lady Emilia?”

“So far? It feels rather...uneventful.”

Just then, Roderick nudged his sister in the back, signifying that she may have suffered a *faux pas*.

“I mean, I haven’t even shared one dance with anyone,” Emilia added, trying to amend the situation.

“There will be plenty of time for that,” Lady Constance replied, then turned her attention to Roderick. “Your face is much more familiar.”

“We have met previously, yes,” Roderick replied.

“So delighted to have you in my home,” Lady Constance said with a winning smile, to which Roderick smiled back. “If you’ll excuse me,” she added before departing.

“She was flirting with you,” Emilia said teasingly.

“Stop it.”

“She was. It was written clearly on her face.”

“Lady Constance is far out of my league.”

Emilia couldn’t help but think that Lady Constance Belmore was out of her league as well. Standing before her hostess, Emilia was reminded of everything that made her unfit for society. She didn’t have that winning smile that Lady Constance had, in her own estimation. Not only that, her dress was sub-par in comparison. These things didn’t bother Emilia too much. She had no great ambitions to be a perfect fit for the *ton*. Yet still, she did wish to present herself appropriately. Or at the very least to not embarrass herself.

“She was not mean-spirited in the slightest,” Emilia finally said.

“Because she was flirting with me, indeed,” Roderick replied.

“Tell me,” Emilia went on, curiosity getting the better of her. “If you could select one lady to dance with – any lady in this room,” Emilia said, wishing to know her brother’s mind. She found it fun to talk with him about his affections for ladies. “Whom would you dance with?”

“Anyone?”

“Anyone.”

Roderick looked about the room, and yet again that *mien* of sadness came over him. Emilia cocked her head in confusion at the sight of it.

“No one.”

“You jest,” Emilia replied.

“I do not jest. There’s no one here I should like to dance with.”

“What has come over you, brother? It’s as though you’ve quite forgot

yourself.”

“I suppose that I have.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“Not just yet,” Roderick replied. “I first need a fresh glass of champagne.”

Emilia was beginning to feel troubled. She'd never known her brother to drink more than two glasses in his lifetime. Something really was troubling him, and Emilia wished to get to the bottom of it. Despite her desire to do so, Emilia didn't wish to push her brother to admit to anything he didn't want to. She decided to let the matter go and found a chair to seat herself in while Roderick procured a fresh glass.

Being seated helped to make Emilia feel more settled. She no longer felt on display, nor did that anxious anticipation flutter in her stomach. She could do what she did best, and that was to observe those around her. None of those rarefied creatures seemed real from where she sat. They were all like characters out of one of her novels. Their smiles were too bright, their hair too flaxen, and their apparel too well-tailored to be believed.

Emilia turned her attention to the handsome faces that populated the ballroom, of which there were many. Did being a part of society instantly make men more handsome? They all sported the Roman coronet of hair, which was very much the fashion of the day. Blue coats were favoured over green or black, and all trousers were tan in colour. Funny that all those men should wear the same thing whilst each woman was a world of fashion unto herself.

Although Emilia delighted in the handsome faces, there was not one that immediately struck her as being more handsome than the rest. Some were tall, others short. Some had brown hair, others blond. Emilia sighed to herself. How was she ever going to find a husband who stood out from the pack? Someone who was, alas, specifically designed for her.

Then Emilia scolded herself for having such thoughts. She believed in love, yes, but to believe that god created someone for everyone, someone that was specifically intended for them and them alone, all of that seemed like utter nonsense. Emilia had heard horror stories of marriages going awry. Of husbands running for fear from their wives, and wives running into the arms of another. Yet still, she did know that the marriage between the late Baron and Baroness of Rutledge was peaceful and loving. The servants told her as much, as did Lord Stanley Grey. So sad that they had to die when they were so seemingly happy in one another's company.

"Here you are," Roderick said, handing Emilia a glass of champagne and seating himself beside her.

"I've been contemplating love," Emilia admitted.

"A perilous thing to do," Roderick replied.

"Do you think it all impossible? A fantasy?"

"I am unsure. I know that love is real. I have felt it myself. But what remains when love is gone? Does love give, and then taketh away?"

“It’s not like you to be so dark.”

“To put it plainly, there’s someone I wish was here, who has not attended.”

“Who else would you wish to be here but me?” Emilia quipped.

“A true lady.”

Roderick’s face was deadly serious and Emilia realised that she should stop teasing him so and listen to what he had to say.

“What lady?”

“Lady Marina Spencer.”

“I do not know that name.”

“That’s because I’ve never told you of her before.”

Roderick took another sip of his champagne whilst Emilia half expected him to throw back the entire thing.



“You never keep secrets from me,” Emilia said, although she did realise that her brother was, indeed, allowed to keep secrets from her if he so chose.

“Some things are difficult to explain, sister,” Roderick replied.

Silence followed and Emilia decided to not push the matter further. Roderick didn’t wish to explain who Lady Marina Spencer was, and Emilia sensed that, in good time, she would find out.

## Chapter 2

Although Roderick's mention of Lady Marina Spencer had captured Emilia's attention, soon thereafter Emilia assumed that something else might occur that would captivate her imagination entirely.

She was merely looking across the ballroom, as she had been doing for most of the evening, and there, with her eyes, she finally came across a figure like none she'd ever seen before. The gentleman was quite tall, his hair dark and short, his suit immaculate, and everywhere he went, and ladies would approach him and blush and coo in his presence. The fellow was impossibly handsome, to such a degree that it might instil suspicion. Emilia had encountered one or two gentlemen like this in the past, so cunning in their handsomeness that it led Emilia to believe that it was merely a facade erected for some kind of vicious endgame.

When the man abruptly turned his gaze towards Emilia and their dark eyes locked, she instantly turned away, thinking that direct eye contact with the fellow was far too stimulating for the senses to endure.

"What is wrong?" Roderick asked, instantly seeing the blush upon her cheek.

"Nothing is wrong. Why do you even ask?" Emilia said, feeling her heart beating rapidly in her chest.

"You seem flustered."

“Perhaps you’re reading into your own feelings this evening,” Emilia suggested.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Roderick replied, returning to his contemplation.

In the silence, Emilia slowly and cautiously turned her eyes back towards where the mysterious man had been but moments before, and sure enough, he looked at her yet again. Emilia turned away more quickly that time, thinking that perhaps she had just been caught in the most embarrassing fashion imaginable.

Despite her shame, Emilia couldn’t help but be transfixed by the man, even in the short moment that their eyes had met. Something akin to excitement and pleasure rushed through her veins. Had she seen him before? Why was it that he seemed oddly familiar, and yet so foreign at the same time? And there was, indeed, something foreign about him. As though he were a visiting prince from an exotic place such as Spain or Italy. He stood out from the other men at the ball and, considering how dully handsome she experienced those other men to be, perhaps it was a situation that Emilia should go ahead and delight in.

The ‘accidental’ looks continued, even after Emilia excused herself from her brother’s company and began to do a turn about the room. As she made her circumnavigation, the man would follow her with his eyes, briefly returning to the conversation that was forced upon him before finding her yet again. In the moments where their eyes did not meet, she could swear that she felt his gaze upon her, even without seeing it. Why was he looking at her so intently?

The gaiety, gossiping and dancing that filled the ballroom endlessly were beginning to make Emilia feel lightheaded, and so she walked into the dining room in order to procure refreshments, of which there was a countless selection. Taking a small sandwich and placing it upon a plate, Emilia walked over to the rather large and grand windows in order to regard the night sky while she took in her sustenance. That was when a rather deep voice caused her to turn back.

“Are you dreaming of escape?” the man’s voice said, and Emilia nearly jumped when she discovered the dark, mysterious gentleman standing right behind her.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Escape. The way that you’re looking out of the window. It leads me to believe that you’re dreaming of greener pastures,” he said with an affable smile. It was the first time that she saw him smile so, and it brought a blush to Emilia’s cheek yet again.

“These events are rather...stifling, are they not?” Emilia replied affably.

“It takes some time, but one does get used to it.”

The sound of the man’s voice and his relaxed stance brought Emilia momentary ease.

“So my brother tells me.”

“You have never been in Lady Constance Belmore’s home before?”

“It is my first time, yes,” Emilia replied.

“You seem to be handling yourself quite well.”

“It takes a lot to get under my skin,” Emilia replied, then instantly regretted those words.

Silence followed as the man smiled to himself, as though Emilia’s reply had had a double meaning.

“I am Lord Joshua Pembroke, Earl of Dannay.”

Emilia was in shock. The earls of Britain were some of the wealthiest and most powerful in the land, and she had never met one who was so young, and so striking. The very mention of the word ‘earl’ brought to mind old, crotchety men who preferred weak tea.

“It’s a great pleasure to meet you,” she replied with relaxed composure. “I am Lady Emilia Grey.”

“I know that,” Joshua replied.

“How?” Emilia asked, thinking it impossible that the Earl of Dannay should have any notion of who she was.

“I asked someone,” Joshua replied with a guilty smile.

“I suppose that is a sound way of finding out,” Emilia replied with a laugh.

“All one need do in this life is ask.”

“Indeed.” Emilia looked down at her sandwich thinking it unnecessary to eat. The presence of Lord Joshua Pembroke had quite steadied her senses.

“Don’t let me prevent you from enjoying that,” Joshua said, nodding his head towards her plate.

“I think it was more an excuse to escape,” Emilia replied bashfully.

“So I was right, then.”

“What?”

“You do wish to escape.”

Joshua was looking at her intently and Emilia couldn't help but wonder at it. She had never seen anyone look at her like that before. What was it that he found so interesting about her? Truly, she didn't think that she was exceptional in the slightest. But Lord Joshua was looking at her as though she were Helen of Troy.

"I take it that you often find yourself at such affairs," Emilia finally said.

"What leads you to make such assumptions?"

"You seem practised in it. And I could see that you know a great deal of people."

"So, you were spying on me?" Joshua asked, lifting his brow.

"I..." Emilia stumbled.

"I'm merely teasing you, Lady Emilia. I was spying on you a great deal as well."

"I did not notice," Emilia replied humorously.

"I find you striking."

Emilia's tongue was struck dumb for a moment. "For the life of me, I don't know why," she managed to reply.

"Allow me to explain myself," Lord Joshua said, putting out his hand. "But may I do so during a dance?"

"I fear that you might not be on my dance card," Emilia said, fumbling quickly through her reticule in order to find the document. Once she had it in hand, she inspected the names and did not see Lord Joshua's there. Before she knew what happened, Joshua gently took the card from her hand and tore it into two pieces.

"One thing that you will learn after attending a number of balls is that there's no need to rely upon this," Joshua explained casually.

"Oh," Emilia said in shock. The surprise written upon her face seemed to amuse him, for Joshua smiled at the sight of it and took her by the hand, gracefully leading her back towards the ballroom.

As they passed through, Emilia noted that all eyes were on them. She even saw Roderick seated by a side table, equal shock written on his face.

*What the devil is going on?* his face seemed to say.

*I'll explain later,* was Emilia's facial reply.

And so the music from the orchestra recommenced and the dance



quickly began. At first, the only thought in Emilia's mind was to not step upon Lord Joshua's toes, as she had been worrying before. The fear was even greater for, looking down, Emilia could see that Lord Joshua had the shiniest black boots she had ever seen. He was the type of man who cared about every detail of his appearance, and were she to muck up his boots, Emilia was quite convinced that it would be the end of her relations with the Earl of Dannay.

Lord Joshua was an incredibly graceful dancer, which did not surprise her in the least. But she was not the first to talk of skill.

"You're well-practised in the dance," Joshua said to her, looking down and admiring her form. Emilia was quite sure that he was not merely admiring her steps.

"I'm afraid that a great deal of that is due to luck. I'm also dancing with an exceptional partner."

"So, you had said that you didn't know why I was looking at you earlier," Lord Joshua said, bringing up a topic that still left Emilia in confusion.

"It's, perhaps, because I look out of place," Emilia replied honestly.

"That could be said to be a good thing," Joshua said with a smile.

As they continued to dance, Emilia found that she had to think of her feet less and less. The formations became effortless, and her and Lord Joshua's bodies moved effortless in unison.

“How so?” Emilia countered. “The women here are some of the most beautiful in Britain.”

“What we have in this ballroom is an assortment of delicacies, yes,” Joshua went on. “But it all comes down to a matter of taste.”

“And what’s your taste?” Emilia asked.

Lord Joshua paused and then looked down at Emilia’s blue gown.

“Blueberry sponge.”

Emilia blushed and Lord Joshua smiled in seeming satisfaction that he had had such an effect upon her.

“I’m being too forward,” he relented, shaking his head.

“No, no,” Emilia replied. “I’m merely not accustomed to men being so ...” she searched her mind for the proper word.

“Forward,” Joshua replied humorously.

“Perhaps so.”

They continued to dance, and Emilia mused over the mysterious man in front of her, beside her, and all around her, dependent upon where the dance had taken them. There was something rather dangerous about him, she had to admit. And unlike most women, Emilia was never one for dangerous men. What was it exactly that she would describe as dangerous? For one thing, he was devilishly handsome in a fashion that did not seem real to the natural eye. For another thing – and this was the greater cause for suspicion – the Earl of Dennaby was dangerously suave. How could she trust such effortless, practised debonair charm? Emilia assumed that he behaved in a similar fashion with all the ladies that he met, and so she determined that she was going to need to temper her excitement. And it truly was excitement that he made her feel, a kind of internal thrill that was hard to deny.

“Would it offend you if I continued to be forward?” Joshua finally asked.

“If I said yes, I fear that it would not prevent you from being so.”

“You are an expert judge of character,” Joshua replied with an affable smile. “To speak plainly, you’re the most beautiful woman in the room.”

Emilia wished to stop dead in her tracks, but to do so would excite even more attention than she had already done solely by dancing with Lord Joshua Pembroke.

“I find that difficult to believe,” Emilia replied, looking about the room at all the glamorous faces that surrounded her, some more natural than others.

“Your beauty is authentic, as is your nature. I could see it from afar,” Joshua explained.

“That is the result of being a country bumpkin,” Emilia quipped.

“I beg to differ. Ladies from the country can be more disagreeable than those in town.”

“I don’t take you for one who goes to the country often.”

“I have a summer estate. I am civilised, after all.”

“Don’t let’s get into a conversation about civility. I could talk of it all night,” Emilia replied, for truly, she had much to say on the topic of civility, and how too often there wasn’t enough of it.

“If I may discourse on your beauty again,” Joshua said, changing the topic.

“You are allowed to do as you choose,” Emilia replied.

“Nothing tempers beauty more than frivolity. I knew instantly that you were a self-contained woman. This keeps all the beauty intact.”

“I am not a marble monument,” Emilia replied with a laugh.

“No, but if you were mine, I would have a monument made of your likeness.”

Just then, the dance ended, and it was expert timing. For whatever reason, Emilia felt like running from the room. It was hard to understand why. The handsomest man she had ever beheld had just remarked upon her beauty, her composure, and even stated that he wished to have her immortalised in alabaster stone. Any woman would have melted right then and there, but not Emilia Grey. She felt exposed, overly stimulated, and mildly distrustful.

“I thank you for a lovely dance,” Emilia said, curtsying and quickly rushing away from the dance floor.

“Farewell,” Joshua replied affably, not seemingly fazed in the slightest that she was running away from him.

She needed fresh air. Having seen a veranda off the dining room, Emilia rushed there, pushed open the door, and took a step out into the cool night. Taking a deep breath, Emilia could finally feel her heart beginning to slow from its rapid pace.

Once Emilia felt significantly composed, she decided that the best plan for the rest of the evening was to return to the party, meet new people, enjoy the delicious food, and try to keep her mind off Joshua Pembroke. It amused her to think that she might see him, yet again, on the dance floor, talking to another lady as he had just spoken to her. Yes, he was nothing but a womanizer, perhaps even a rake. Emilia found that if she kept her mind fixed on this notion, the extraordinary, incendiary things that Joshua had made her feel would leave her mind, and her body.

Sadly, every time that Lord Joshua caught her eye, he was not flirting with another.

“I saw you dancing with Lord Joshua Pembroke,” Lady Constance said, approaching in much the same way as she had before.

“I fear that everyone did,” Emilia replied.

“Why do you fear it?”

“He’s not the *type* of man that I’m accustomed to.”

“He’s not the type of man that anyone is accustomed to.”

Lady Constance’s response was further proof that Emilia’s assumptions about Lord Joshua might, indeed, be correct. His manner must be notorious to the *ton*. Although she wished to investigate the issue further, Emilia didn’t desire to be caught as a newly outed lady asking endless questions about the man with whom she shared her first dance.

And so, as was Emilia’s nature, she let the whole notion go and enjoyed the rest of the evening. She continued to chat with Lady Constance who, indeed, had a sour tongue; as Roderick had reported. Comically, the conversation began as light and frivolous, but the more that Lady Constance opened up, the more the venom boiled to the surface. She made fun of various dresses, scorned her cooks for

making such terrible food, and bemoaned that there were a few questionable guests who had attended uninvited. Once she was done venting her dislike for various and sundry things, Lady Constance excused herself and found a new ear to complain to.

So, her brother was a good judge of character.

Remembering that she had abandoned Roderick for some time, Emilia looked around the room in order to locate him. Although he was sad and lowly before, she caught him in conversation with a gaggle of ladies who had brought a smile to his face. It brought a smile to Emilia's face as well. It was so much more fitting to see Roderick happy. Maybe the night's entertainment had made him forget about Lady Marina Spencer. Emilia sincerely hoped so.

\*\*\*

In an adjacent drawing room, Lord Joshua Pembroke sat with his legs crossed and his hands clasped upon his knees. He leaned back in his chair and looked at the collection of lords and ladies that had assembled around him, each partaking in conversation that he knew was meant to impress him. Sadly, Lord Joshua was not impressed, but he kept the amused smile upon his lips, nonetheless.

The warm smile mostly came from the memory of dancing with Lady Emilia Grey. In the end, he thought that he had had a favourable effect on her, but indeed, had been too forward. She ran away from him in such a way to suggest that she was not used to Joshua's manner of attention. Although it pained him to think that he drove her off, what choice did he have? When he had affections, there was no denying it, neither to himself nor the lady in question.

“Lord Joshua, do tell us of your grand tour,” a mousy lady by the name of Cecily asked. Her dress was a shocking pink and it nearly burned Lord Joshua’s eyes to look at.

“My travels left me wanting nothing,” Joshua assured her. “Never have I seen such splendour as the canals of Venice, the grand palaces of Vienna, nor the great mountains of Switzerland.”

“I’m envious of your travels,” a gentleman replied.

“It is my great passion,” Lord Joshua said casually, and although he was holding court over their rapt attention, he was speaking the truth. “I’m planning another trip soon.”

“Where will you go?” Lady Cecily asked.

Perhaps, wherever Lady Emilia Grey should happen to be.



## Chapter 3

Although Emilia was successful at temporarily banishing the earl from her thoughts, it was during the carriage ride home that he managed to creep back into her mind. She looked over at her brother, who was seated across from her, and momentarily Emma considered telling him about Lord Joshua. But surely, if she did so, her brother would tease her to no end and, therefore, Emilia decided to keep the earl within the confines of her own thoughts.

She did delight in recalling the things he had said to her, the way he had danced, and that charming look in his eye. The very thought of him made her blush, and Emilia was grateful for the dark interior of the coach so that her brother could not see.

Only once in Emilia's life had a man made her feel that way upon first meeting him. Oddly enough, it was a stable boy by the name of Gregory who had been hired to look after the horses at their country estate. Uncle Stanley had hired the boy, but Emma could scarce call him a boy because, for her, he looked more like a man. He had the earl's dark handsomeness and relaxed, debonair manner. The moment that Emilia met Gregory, she felt her heart pound in her chest, and all kinds of sensations came over her that she could not explain. Emilia had become frightened by the titillation that Gregory would make her feel when he ever spoke to her with his deep voice.

When Gregory had helped Emilia onto her horse, uncle Stanley spotted the stable boy gently placing a hand upon her knee and the stable boy was fired at once. The time that Gregory had spent at the country estate had been brief, but Emma still recalled that spinning feeling he had given her.

Lord Joshua Pembroke had made her feel all those feelings once more, perhaps more intensely.

“Did you enjoy yourself, brother?” Emilia asked, wishing to make small talk in order to distract herself.

“I was amused, at times,” Roderick replied, looking out of the window.

“Lady Constance Belmore was everything that you described her to be,” Emilia said with a smile.

“Her manner is notorious, but at least she knows how to throw a good party.”

“Do you think that I...*presented* myself in a proper manner?” Emilia asked.

“I think you made a lasting impression, yes,” Roderick replied. “Particularly when you danced with the Earl of Dennaby.”

Emilia was struck dumb for a moment. She was hoping that her brother wouldn't bring up the earl, and from the tone of his voice, it seemed as though he was not pleased.

“It was merely one dance. He seemed like an interesting gentleman.” Roderick looked at his sister and lifted his brow, as though she was

hiding something from him.

“Let’s not speak more of it, brother. I’m terribly tired.”

“Yes, I’m sure that you’re exhausted, sister. That’s why you’ll be up all night discussing Lord Joshua with Gina.” Roderick smiled a wide, playful grin.

“That’s a lie!” Emilia protested, thinking that there wasn’t a chance she’d be talking with her gossiping maid for the rest of the evening. And if they were going to talk, it certainly wasn’t going to be about Lord Joshua Pembroke.

The rest of the carriage ride was undertaken in silence, and Emilia was glad for it. It was too late for her brother’s teasing. But to her dismay, once they arrived back at the townhouse, Emilia went straight to her room and encountered Gina there, and she had to hold back the urge to talk about what her brother predicted that she would talk about.

“Did you have a lovely time, Ma’am?” Gina asked.

“There were certainly many interesting people there.”

“Anyone in particular that was of interest?”

Gina was middling in age, short in stature, and prematurely grey-haired. She helped to undo Emilia’s curls and gown whilst they spoke.

Emilia wanted to answer the question honestly, that she had danced with the Earl of Dennaby and now she couldn't tear him from her mind. If there was anyone she could talk to it was Gina. And so, despite denying her brother's prediction, Emilia went ahead and gave into his assumptions.

"Lord Joshua Pembroke," Emilia replied, anxiously awaiting her response.

"My word," the maid replied, still pulling pins from Emilia's hair.

"Do you know anything of him?" Emilia asked, for although Gina was a lowly maid, she knew a thing or two about London society. She was always a gossip, and every once in a while, Emilia enjoyed indulging in that fact.

"Do I know anything about the Earl of Dennaby?" Gina asked, as though she were insulted. "Of course I know all that there is to know about him."

Emilia, in shock, turned around to face Gina, and noted a look of disgust on her maid's face.

"You don't seem pleased," Emilia replied.

"I fear that I shall need to procure tea in order to explain things fully," Gina said. It was common knowledge that Gina was unable to gossip if she didn't have a cup of tea in hand.

“Perhaps it is too late for this discussion,” Emilia said, thinking that she had opened a door that could never be boarded up and shut.

“It’s never too late for this kind of discussion,” Gina said mischievously and went at once to summon a servant to bring the tea. Emilia resigned herself to her maid’s gossiping ways and seated herself by the window, comfortably wrapped in her sleeping costume.

“Where do I begin?” Gina said, pouring the tea and seating herself across from her mistress.

“Wherever you like,” Emilia said.

“It does not surprise me in the least that you were approached by Lord Joshua Pembroke.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you’re beautiful, for one thing,” Gina said, taking a sip of her tea, “and for another, Lord Joshua is a born and bred *approacher*.”

Emilia brought a hand up to her face in order to conceal her laughter.

“There’s nothing funny about it,” Gina went on. “Now that you’ve entered into society, it’s high time that you screwed your head straight

upon your shoulders.”

“I’m open to what you have to say,” Emilia said, relenting.

In truth, Emilia knew as well as anyone that to be spoken to by a woman of Gina’s standing in such a way was highly inappropriate. And yet, considering that Emilia did not have a proper mother and father, the behaviour was more or less accepted. What’s more, Emilia found Gina to be delightfully funny in her seriousness.

“He is notorious as being one of the most handsome men in London,” Gina continued, folding her hands in her lap, “and also, one of the richest,” she added, lifting her brow.

“Of his finances, I’m not the least interested.”

“Well, perhaps you’re the only girl in society that would say such a thing. I’m told that he’s followed everywhere he goes by ladies hoping to gain his attention...and his gold.”

Emilia tried to suppress the laughter but found that she could not. A little squeal escaped.

“The Earl of Dennaby is notorious for being temperamental and unfriendly, to boot. It’s not uncommon for men with that classification of wealth to be so. The reason is, they think that because they’re so rich, they’re allowed to behave in any way that they choose.”

“I have met fellows of that character as well,” Emilia admitted.

“So, you must have spotted this behaviour in the earl instantly.”

Emilia thought back upon the encounter and came to the conclusion that she did not. He seemed haughty at times, and yes, too forward, but he was never temperamental.

“There is a rumour,” Gina said, carrying on, “that he once threw a plate at the prince regent.”

“Oh, come now,” Emilia protested.

“My hand to god,” Gina said, puckering her lips and raising a hand. “They were discussing some kind of financial matters and the earl became so frustrated with what the regent had said, he picked up a plate that held half a pickled herring sandwich and threw it at the regent’s head. The Earl of Dennaby has not been invited to the palace since.”

“I should think not,” Emilia replied.

“Also, he once shot his own horse.”

“Gina, why ever would he do such a thing?” Emilia asked, no longer associating any truth with her maid’s words.

“It was a fine and rare Spanish stallion, and Lord Joshua Pembroke shot it square in the eyes, merely because he could.”

“Merely because he could?”

“Indeed, there was no purpose to it whatsoever. He simply wanted to prove that he could buy another one.”

“What a ghastly thing to do,” Emilia said, shaking her head.

“One more piece of information, but I must admit that this one might just be conjecture.”

“There is a very strong chance, yes,” Emilia replied.

“The Earl of Dennaby keeps ...” Gina said, leaning in and hushing her voice. “A harem.”

“A harem?”

“Of women, yes. He keeps a harem of women at his country estate.”

“Gina, you know how much I love you, but this is far too absurd.”



“I only speak of what I hear,” Gina replied, raising her hands in the air to wash herself of blame.

“It’s strange how Roderick never spoke of the dish of pickled herring, the Spanish stallion, nor the harem when he mentioned the earl,” Emilia said in mock confusion.

“He doesn’t speak to the same sources that I speak to,” Gina replied in an aloof manner. She began to clear the porcelain china, signifying that their little talk was coming to an end. “It’s time for you to rest now. I have said all that I know of the Earl of Dennaby and I hope that you will take heed.”

“I will consider your words in all seriousness,” Emilia said lightly, walking to her bed.

Gina stopped at the door and turned to say one last thing. “You know how much I care for you, sweet girl,” she said, her voice turning tender. “All of this may sound ridiculous to you, but it comes from deep concern...and love.”

“I know, Gina. And I thank you,” Emilia replied with a smile.

As soon as Gina left the room, Emilia lowered her head to her pillow and fast fell asleep. Even though there were high points and low points to the evening, the overall experience was pleasurable. Emilia was finally coming out into society, and although it didn’t rule her entire world as it did for other ladies, it still caused a great deal of excitement within her. Whether or not the Earl of Dennaby was as Gina explained, it was still a thrill to garner his attention. And Emilia was sure that, in due time, the truth of his character would be

revealed.

*Want to read the rest of the story? [Check out the book on Amazon!](#)*

*Also, please turn the page to find a special gift from me!*

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get  
my latest **Full-Length Novel** “**The Enchanted by a Fiery Lady**”  
(available only to my subscribers) for **FREE!**

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://lucylangton.com/adelaide>

